

December 2016 - Rachel Beaumont

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Three Spires Singers is an audition choir based in Truro of more than a hundred-strength. On Saturday 10 December the choir performed Handel's *Messiah*, an annual tradition both for Three Spires Singers and, of course, choirs and audiences around the world. The Truro audience braved miserable weather and turned out in force, packing the Cathedral to the rafters. The atmosphere was one of festive (if damp) good cheer, enhanced and enriched by the satisfying performances of choir, orchestra, soloists and conductor.

Christopher Gray has directed Three Spires Singers since 2008 and has something of a monopoly in the Truro choral scene: he also directs the Chamber Choir of Truro School, who joined Three Spires Singers for this *Messiah*, and the Cornwall Youth Choir, in addition to his day job as Director of Music for the Cathedral, where he leads the acclaimed Cathedral Choir. On the evidence of this performance, Truro is in safe hands. Gray was ever attentive, calm and clear, keeping a steady touch on the tiller through the piece's more challenging passages. The choir was clearly well drilled; their lines were elegantly shaped in impressive tandem with the Three Spires Orchestra – no mean feat for a group of such size, be it amateur or professional. Gray's tempos were on the whole astutely chosen, allowing the appreciation of those larger shapes as well as the details within them, while maintaining a brisk and high-energy pace throughout. At one or two points that briskness verged on over-ambitious for such a large choir – not to mention the cathedral-sized acoustic – but the overall effect was of a considered and considerate engagement with this much-loved music.

The four soloists slotted smoothly into this well-oiled machinery. They are all impressive singers, all relatively near the start of their careers – the youngest, tenor Richard Pinkstone, is still a student. His is an attractive, straw-coloured voice that encompasses with apparent ease Handel's punishingly high-lying lines; he only needs more definition in the fiendish colloratura. Soprano Lucy Hall is a familiar figure in British opera, and has the kind of classic, creamy voice that is an absolute gift in the *Messiah*. She sang her wonderful arias with honest, plangent beauty. Mezzo-soprano Laura Woods also has a voice that

is well-suited to Handel – a rare find among mezzos today – although her somewhat imperious presence translated into limited engagement with the text. Bass-baritone Timothy Dickinson had no such problem, singing with authoritative proclamation and firm musicality. Thanks to his generous singing and easy rapport with the excellent Chloe Abbott in the orchestra, 'The Trumpet Shall Sound' was the evening's highlight.

Gray followed reasonably common practice of making two deep cuts in the final two parts, and in some arias curtailed the da capos. I shed a tear for 'O death where is thy sting', but these omissions did mean the momentum of Part I was carried through to the end, building satisfyingly to those two great climaxes of the Hallelujah chorus and the final Amen. It was in these movements that heads came out of copies and all eyes trained on Gray, to thrilling effect. The choir should aspire to this level in all their performances. In an ideal world there would also be more balance between sections – the choir is overwhelmingly top-heavy, although to the choir and Gray's credit all parts were audible and intonation was never imperilled. What else would I want if I could have everything? Better concentration within the cello section; and more unity between soloists in their approach to ornamentation. But these are pallid criticisms against Saturday's achievement: an always entertaining, always tasteful performance of Handel's masterpiece.