

Messiah

Handel

Three Spires Singers and Orchestra

James Anderson-Besant

Truro Cathedral

Saturday 7th December 2024

Handel's *Messiah* has to be the most frequently performed large choral work in this country. Since 2010, the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra have presented it six times, and what would have been a seventh, planned for 2020, was cancelled because of Covid restrictions. That is typical of many choral societies throughout the country.

Such familiarity, such affection both evident and deserved, testify to the musical imagination and power with which Handel treats this most magisterial subject — and to the brilliance and insight of his collaborator Charles Jennens who, apparently with the assistance of the latter's chaplain the Rev. Mr Pooley, assembled the libretto from words familiar to the vast majority of mid-18th-century church-going people — the King James translation of the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer's* translations of the Psalms.

Familiarity brings dangers. In present times the listener can become convinced that a favourite recording presents the way the music should always go. Performers, be they a vocal or instrumental soloist, or a conductor, have to grapple not only with that same temptation, and therefore with the dangers of imitation, but also with the weight of tradition. In short, it can be hard to make such familiar music sound fresh.

Nevertheless, fresh was one of the many adjectives that came to mind during the Three Spires' performance at Truro Cathedral on 7th December 2024. Others included lively and vivid. The opening section of the oratorio's French-style Overture was a good start, played in a firm, double-dotted (but not over-dotted) style that made me think of comments made by the musical polymath Roger North, some 50

years before *Messiah*'s 1742 premiere. Referring to the then-new import of French orchestral style into English string ensembles, North praised such double-dotting as a "strong snatching way of playing, to make the musick brisk and good."

"Brisk and good" — two more adjectives that sprang to mind in much of this performance. One of the dangers of brisk tempos, which most of them were, is that they can make the music hard-driven, with little sense that it is breathing, or even that it can breathe. However, one of the considerable strengths of this *Messiah* was that, although it did feel brisk it also breathed — most of the time.

One of the primary reasons was that the conductor James Anderson-Besant's tempos were shaped not so much by a beat-driven briskness, as by an awareness of metre, by a sense of motion from one bar to the next and beyond. Good instances were the choruses "And the Glory of the Lord" and "O Thou Who Tellest Good Tidings", which can easily sound choppy when done briskly. Although the triple time was pretty fast, it felt spacious because it was not a hard "one, two three", but a springy one-in-a-bar — a kind of bounce from one downbeat to the next and likewise for the full length of a phrase.

Most of the time the Three Spires Singers handled *Messiah*'s more complicated choruses well, though there were occasional bouts of blurred detail. "He Trusted in God" took a few seconds to get into its stride, and some of the semiquaver runs in "For Unto Us a Child is Born" were soggy. But those are by no means the most demanding choruses, and the most striking choral achievements of the evening included two of the toughest pieces. "All We Like Sheep" was splendid — sharp in attack and ensemble and impeccable in its control of shape and dynamics. And "Let us Break Their Bonds Asunder", probably the toughest of the lot, was impressive in its accurate command of pitch and rhythm. There was no sign of that perennial limitation — explosively accurate rhythm, but indeterminate pitching. Moreover, one of the most consistent strengths of this performance was the full-blooded quality of the choral sound, be it in quiet or loud passages.

That said, I found it hard to determine why the “Hallelujah Chorus” was not as impressive as it can be. Nothing wrong with the choral singing or the orchestral playing, which was always confident, accurate and lively. It was perhaps something to do with pacing — not the same thing as speed — for although the fairly fast tempo was not an inherent problem, the result was not as majestic as it might have been, or perhaps should be. Something perhaps to do with allowing the music to breath a bit more, so that the scriptural exclamations such as “Wonderful, Counsellor” and so forth, have an emphasis that differentiates them from the preceding words.

That’s all to do with one of the most fundamental characteristics of Baroque musical aesthetics — that music should not so much express the feeling invoked in us by the words, as intensify the meaning of words themselves and therefore elevate our response to the words. It’s a subtle distinction, and especially relevant to solo performance.

In that respect this performance had four winners in its solo singers. A memorable highlight of the concert was the bass solo “Why do the Nations so Furiously Rage Together”. Malachy Frame sang, and the orchestra dug into their semiquavers, with just the right amount of speedy furiousness — impassioned, powerful and accurate; yet it never felt rushed. Yet again, this was an instance of rhythm being driven less by the beat than by the metre. It worked! So did the celebrated aria “The Trumpet Shall Sound”, which featured some impeccably shaped solo trumpet playing.

The soprano soloist was Rebecca Hardwick, whose singing was always confident. That celebrated gem “I Know that My Redeemer Liveth” was among the concert’s highlights of sensitive singing; and the contrasts across the extended recitative “There were shepherds abiding in the fields” were unfailingly apt in general character and timing. She did sometimes produce a rather hard tone that felt as if it was the result of over-striving, and sometimes intonation was a tad vagrant. But those concerns were never present in a beautifully floaty account of “How Beautiful are the Feet.”

To ornament or not to ornament — or ornament just a bit. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ornamentation was a hot topic, expected of soloists vocal or instrumental if a section of an aria was repeated. Handel is among the many composers whose views have been preserved, either anecdotally or in writing; and in his case they seem to have been often caustic. A happy result of such ornamentation would be a demonstration of the performer's technical ability; but it would be even better if it increased the rhetorical force of the text, and far worse if it was inappropriate to the text, which it all too often was.

In this performance of *Messiah*, the four soloists treated us to ornamentation that was usually apt, but sometimes felt as if it was just taking advantage of the opportunity, rather than bolstering that which we already had heard. That feeling was reinforced by the concert's highlight of impressively apt ornamentation — the alto air "But who May Abide". James Laing sang the opening section with a warming lyricism and, in his always beautiful tone, with just a hint of anxiety. In the second section, "For He is Like a Refiner's Fire", he took off, supported by fiery repeated semiquavers from the orchestra. So, when he returned to the opening section, Laing's impeccably judged ornamentation felt like a rhetorical projection of the background truth set up by the middle section. Perfect!

Because of the disruption of transport due to storm Darragh, tenor Ryan Vaughan Davies replaced Ruari Bowen at very short notice. But there was no hint of troubling pressure in Davies's singing, which was always strongly projected and secure in tone and pitching. He was strikingly effective at using the music's rhetorical devices to make the text speak out. Comforting lyricism in "But Thou didst not Leave His Soul in Hell", fierceness in "Thou Shalt Break Them", and plaintiveness in the recitative and air "Thy Rebuke Hast Broken His Heart"/"Behold and See" — this range of expression, delivered always with technical assurance, felt masterly.

This performance of *Messiah* presented just over two hours of music, achieved through some judicious cuts in Parts Two and Three. I find no problem with that. After all, Handel did the same in some of his own performances of oratorios; and

the *Messiah* premiered in Dublin in 1742 was different in many ways from the *Messiah* we now know and love.

The crucial thing is what I mentioned earlier — that this performance always sounded fresh, as if this extraordinary music was being discovered anew. That was epitomised by the atmosphere created in the sequence of choruses “Surely He Hath Born Our Grievs”/”And With His Stripes”/”All We Like Sheep”/”And the Lord Hath Laid on Him the Iniquity of us All”. Brisky-paced, with largely proportional tempos across its four contrasting sections (all impeccably judged), this performance captured the sequence’s extraordinary range of the dramatic, the violent, the lamenting and more. Full-blooded choral tone and security with pitch, dynamics and rhythm made this a performance that I shall remember as a highlight of this *Messiah*.

Martin Adams

Martin Adams has lived in Camborne since 2016. Between 1979 and 2015 he worked in the Music Department of Trinity College Dublin as a lecturer and latterly as associate professor. In addition to his academic publications, he was for thirty years a frequent contributor of concert reviews to *The Irish Times*.