

Christmas Oratorio – Review by Kevin Anderson Dec 2016

Christmas brings a whole spectrum of musical treats, from the traditional carol concert to the lighter-weight entertainments. But there is one hallmark choral work, and last Saturday Eastbourne Choral Society brought it triumphantly to life.

Bach's Christmas Oratorio is a majestic but quite sprawling work, a stitching together of six cantatas which were written for sequential performances across the days of Christmas. It opens exuberantly, with chorus, percussion and brass united in a great shout of joy; and yet it has moments of extraordinary, pin-quiet reverence. For a packed All Saints Church, this was simply a box of delights.

There is much talk these days of the Gareth Malone Effect, and the breezy young amateur must have inspired thousands of singers and scores of new community choirs. Eastbourne Choral, seasoned performers all, would probably prefer to claim the John Hancorn Effect.

John is a superb director. Conducting without a baton, he coaxes the choir and teases out the texture of a work which only benefits from his light, flexible touch. The great choral repertoire took quite a battering over the years from the Victorians to Huddersfield Choral, with their noisy massed ranks; but this is Baroque music, and John perfectly lifts every upbeat, values every semi-quaver, and never beats four where two will suffice. The music simply dances and delights with every phrase. To achieve this sound with a large choir is close to magicianship.

The choir itself, close to a hundred voices, was absolutely wonderful on the night. Thrilling and vibrant in the big choruses, reverent and radiant in the chorales, they had really searched out the essence of the work: Christmas Oratorio is celebration threaded through with affection. The slightly outnumbered gentlemen held their own perfectly well, and in any case the soprano line is naturally the most prominent in the chorales. With excellent tuning and dynamics, this is a choir which truly conveys the spirit of the music.

John Hancorn prudently eases the tempo in one or two of the most complex choruses, and they are underpinned by an orchestra of beautiful precision. The Eastbourne Sinfonia leader Alison Bury has a frighteningly strong CV with, among others, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. For chorus singers, there is always a sense of privilege to be performing alongside these consummate professionals.

There is a story to be told, and tenor Neil Jenkins is the definitive narrator, expressive and effortless across the range. Sussex has few, if any, more distinguished singers or scholars of the period.

The other three soloists bring gifts as rich as the Magi. Rachel Shouksmith delights with her lightness and fluency in *With His Hand*, and mezzo Rebecca Leggett has beautiful warmth in two of the work's finest arias, *Prepare Thyself Zion* and *Slumber Beloved*. In keeping with the work, bass Andrew Robinson is reflective and engaging, rather than declamatory. The soloists' final quartet is woven like a tapestry. (cont)

And what a lovely, welcoming atmosphere this choir creates. Singers and audience mingle like old friends over an interval glass of wine, and the whole church radiates pleasure in this great and timeless music. "I came in thinking this was a bit too early for Christmas, but now my Christmas has properly started!" was one overheard comment as happy audience members filed out into a chill, sharp night. Freezing on the outside perhaps, but hearts all a-glow.