

'Messiah' inspires audiences before Christmas at Strathmore

MARK DREISONSTOK

George Frideric Handel's "Messiah" is an annual tradition for many at this time of year, and the largest production in our area was held this past weekend in two stunning performances at Strathmore Music Center, with its excellent acoustics.

Handel himself said relative to this work: "I did think I did see all heaven before me," and this feeling of awe and reverence permeates this oratorio often performed at Christmastime.

The "Messiah" is a Baroque-era oratorio, a highly structured choral work employing elements of narrative and drama. Although very often only portions are performed, here the three parts of the "Messiah" were presented. They feature prophecies of the birth of Jesus Christ, the actual birth, elements of Christ's days on earth, the Passion, the Resurrection, and what might be termed commentaries or homilies on Christ's life.

The work is not always linear, for direct quotes from the Four Gospels are largely eschewed in favor of lines drawn from the Psalms, the prophets and the Book of Common Prayer. The production is also unusual in that Handel, though German, used English for the work, reflecting his long residence in England.

The National Philharmonic succeeded brilliantly in its counter-point playing of the Sinfonia or Overture as well as when it accompanied singers. The Chorus of Part I ("His Yoke Is Easy"), in particular, showed the richness of a Baroque orchestra. Vocal moments of note were tenor Matthew Loyal Smith's "Comfort Ye, My People, Saith Your God." Another memorable performance was soprano Esther Heideman's plaintive singing of "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth," which included lines from the Book of Job, a biblical text not often associated with the Christmas season. Then again, the "Messiah" itself was originally not associated with Christmas but with Easter.



National Philharmonic Chorale Artistic Director and Conductor Stan Engebretson leads the National Philharmonic's performance of Handel's "Messiah" at The Music Center at Strathmore on Dec. 22. (Courtesy Photo)

The full chorus and orchestra at Strathmore sang out a resounding "Hallelujah Chorus," with the audience standing at this point for the entire chorus. Excellent program notes explained the origin of this tradition: "Legend has it that, during the 'Hallelujah' chorus, King George II was so moved that he stood up, even though there is no evidence that he was ever present at that time or any other performance of the oratorio."

Whether the legend is true or not, ever since, audiences have stood at this portion, as did the one at Strathmore. Also, the program notes were beneficial in including the full text of the libretto being sung.

This production, in particular, brought out the “programmatic” side of Handel’s “Messiah,” i.e., that there are musical choices made by the composer to suggest story and scenery, as in the brief “Pastoral Symphony” instrumental portion of the “Messiah.” Here Handel conjures – and the National Philharmonic brings to life – “the hill-sides around Bethlehem...a land of flocks and herds...the melody breathes peace as the shadows lengthen with the setting sun,” as H.R. Haweis describes this section of the work in his book “Music and Morals.”

In addition to being an outstanding performance in a major county venue, the National Philharmonic production of the “Messiah” at the Strathmore Music Center was a special moment for young, talented Montgomery County singers. According to National Philharmonic Chorale Artistic Director and Conductor Stan Engebretson: “This year we are joined by high school choral scholars from across Montgomery County, who is singing this work for the first time. It is wonderful to see these generations performing side by side as we build our choral legacy, passing the experience of ‘Messiah’ on to future generations in Montgomery County.”

The high school choral scholars program drew eight singers from local schools, including Montgomery Blair, Northwood, Wheaton, Sherwood, Richard Montgomery and St. Mary’s Ryken.

We look forward to much more from these young singers in the future, as we eagerly await the next performances of the National Philharmonic.

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