



HANDEL'S MESSIAH: REVIEW

Reviewed by David Sell in *The Press*, 9 December 2013.

Brian Law's last show as musical director

Messiah, presented by the Christchurch City Choir with Francesca Lombardi-Mazzulli (soprano), Russell Harcourt (countertenor), Christopher Bowen (tenor), Jonathan Lemalu (bass) and the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Brian Law, at the Christ's College Hall, Saturday 4 December 2013.

The annual Messiah is always well attended. But there was another good reason for a capacity house at this year's performance by the City Choir: after 22 years this was Brian Law's last appearance as musical director. As usual, he brought a keen musical insight to his interpretation, following his own principles described in his programme note to his first Christchurch performance in 1991 - "... to achieve the essence of the Baroque, the sense of theatre, the sense of lightness ...".

Handel placed strong demands on his singers. For the choir, rapid runs are difficult to keep together, and light. From the soloists we expect even more. These and sudden changes of mood are the essence of Baroque theatre that Law brought to the performance. As usual, he directed from the harpsichord with assurance. And soloists, choir and orchestra responded accordingly.

Soprano, Francesca Lombardi-Mazzulli, has a brilliant clarity, especially in her upper register. This was most keenly apparent in her athletic account of the aria, "Rejoice greatly". I found the tone quality of the countertenor, Russell Harcourt, too refined to be real. One expects a stronger character to the sound in an important aria such as "O thou that tellest" to set the drama. Christopher Bowen and Jonathan Lemalu were strongly contrasting: Lemalu's voice as luscious as Bowen's was finely articulate. The Christchurch Symphony Orchestra, nicely proportioned for Handel, was always secure, as was the organ continuo, sensitively played by Martin Setchell.

Which brings me back to Law. It is easy to take for granted the skilled preparation and study to prepare a major work for performance. It was clear that the standing ovation at the end was as much a recognition of his work over many years as for yet another performance of Handel's Messiah.

A nice touch to finish was the announcement of his successor as musical director of the Christchurch City Choir. With a few well-chosen words Law symbolically handed over his baton to Andrew Withington.

