

Review: Bach Choir Handel ‘Messiah’ and Bach ‘Magnificat’ were compelling, engaging

By Steve Siegel

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As Handel once remarked when congratulated on the success of a “Messiah” performance: “I should be sorry if I only entertained them – I wish to make them better.”

The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, in its first-ever performance of Part 1 of Handel’s mighty oratorio Saturday and Sunday, achieved both of Handel’s goals in one of the most compelling performances of the work I have heard.

Paired with “Messiah” was J.S. Bach’s celebratory “Magnificat” in an equally engaging performance in the Sunday afternoon program I attended at Bethlehem’s First Presbyterian Church. The concert was a near sell-out, and a repeat of the previous evening’s performance at the First Presbyterian Church of Allentown.

It was truly a joy to hear Handel’s and Bach’s works performed side-by-side. To Handel, oratorio was a form very close to opera, and if delivered in a purely portentous, churchified manner, it ceases to breathe.

In this performance, it literally sang. Bach’s “Magnificat,” conceived as it is on such a grand scale with its rousing choruses, timpani, and trumpets, perfectly complemented Handel’s intent to entertain as well as to enlighten.

Joining the Bach Choir and the Bach Festival Orchestra, all under the direction of Greg Funfgeld, were soloists Agnes Zsigovics, soprano; Daniel Taylor, countertenor; Isaiah Bell, tenor, and David Newman, bass-baritone. Soprano Fiona Gillespie made a brief but enchanting appearance in the Part 10 trio of the “Magnificat.”

The soothing opening Sinfonia of the “Messiah” was followed by Isaiah Bell’s exceptionally soothing and poignant delivery of “Comfort ye.” There was a tenderness and sweetness to his lines — sort of like hearing a John McCormack without the accent. He endowed the dramatic “Every valley” with delightful ornamentation, treating phrases such as “the rough places” with virtuosic embellishment.

David Newman’s reading of both recitatives and arias was powerfully dramatic. His deep

bass-baritone was combined with a diction that made each word seem chiseled in stone. His recitative “Thus saith the Lord” was a real stunner. On the other end of the vocal scale was soprano Agnes Zsigovics, whose virtuosic delivery of “Rejoice greatly” was jaunty and bright, and just bubbled with lovely coloratura.

What made this performance truly exceptional to me was the replacement of the usual contralto parts with a countertenor. There was a warm glow to Daniel Taylor’s “But who may abide” and “Good tidings from Zion” that simply doesn’t exist in the much cooler contralto timbre. And what a versatile voice — he could be all sweetness and light as in his duet with Zsigovics, “He shall feed his flock,” or sound fearless and daring, as in his commanding recitatives.

Equally noteworthy was the clarity and crispness of the chorus throughout the performance. Even the most powerful lines were delivered with a transparency and lightness of texture. An especially delightful melding of exuberance and tenderness in “For unto us” made phrases such as “Prince of Peace” literally dance with joy.

Of course, for really virtuosic choral tone painting — and pairing voice with obbligato — few composers can match Bach. The “Magnificat” is a case in point. The five-part overlapping choral lines in “Sicut locutus est” and “Omnes generations” were impressive demonstrations of the choir’s skill.

There were many charming pairings of voice with instrumental accompaniment. I’m pretty sure you could pair Taylor’s voice with a saxophone and it would still sound swell, but fortunately Bach chose a pair of flutes in “Esurientes implevit.” Taylor’s contralto simply floated between the flute obbligato of Susan Charlton and Christine Moulton.

Zsigovics rendered "Quia respexit," accompanied by Mary Watt on oboe, with good-natured sweetness. The Part 10 trio, with Zsigovics, Taylor, and Gillespie, was also a charmer, this time backed by Watt and oboist Nobuo Kitagawa. It was a pleasure to hear Bell again in "Deposuit potentes," this time in the lower register of his range and with a sense of power and urgency not required in Handel's work.

Exceptionally fine trumpet work and timpani made the rousing choruses, well, sound truly rousing, with the final "Gloria" a choral and instrumental paean to Christmas joy.