

## **AGILE MUSICIANS, DISTRACTED LISTENERS**

### **German-British Messiah performed in the Frauenkirche**

Handel's Messiah – the creation of a German composer who worked above all in England - was performed in the Dresden Frauenkirche on Friday, bringing together German and British performers in further affirmation of the joint collaboration on the reconstruction of the church. The concert by the Bach Choir together with the Dresden Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra came about with the support of the British Dresden Trust, an organisation which has been involved for several years in fund-raising and has paid amongst other things for the new orb and cross on the dome of the church. The soloists – two from each country – included Eva Kirchner (soprano) and Georg Zeppenfeld (bass) along with Iestyn Davies (countertenor, standing in at short notice for Karen Cargill who was indisposed) and James Gilchrist (tenor). Responsibility for directing this heavily symbolic undertaking fell to David Hill, Musical Director of the Bach Choir.

Hill – sometimes conducting with bouncy gestures and delight in detail, sometimes directing from the harpsichord – put together a fresh and musically flexible interpretation, achieved with some particularly individual tempi. The 100 ladies and gentlemen of the Bach Choir – a 130-year old amateur ensemble with a total of 250 members and an international reputation – showed no signs of wear and tear as they performed all the demanding choruses of the two and a half hour performance (with some cuts mainly in the third part). Despite the strength of their number they produced a clear, transparent tone suffused with a sparkling soprano line and particularly clearly-defined fugue entries. As to the balance of the voices, the fact that tenors are something of a problem-child is clearly a well-known phenomenon in Britain too.

Eva Kirchner, sang her part, which with the exception of the "Rejoice" aria is largely contemplative, with a slender soprano voice. The young Iestyn Davies proved to be a discovery with his expressive, counter-tenor which radiated great naturalness – and if as happened once a vowel fell out of line this was simply marginal and should disappear with growing experience.

James Gilchrist was sparkling and expressive, taking great pleasure in ornamentation; and Georg Zeppenfeld skilfully avoided exaggerating his impassioned arias and concentrated instead on supple voicing and flexible articulation.

The Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra was inspiring – even though the continuo was perhaps not having a good day – with rhythmic phrasing, radiant sparkle and splendid soloists drawn from their own ranks. Their ensemble playing was particularly precise so that, despite the 6/4 violin line-up, maintaining a balance with the large choral forces presented no difficulty.

It was only a pity that so many in the body of the church seemed unable to engage fully with the performance and that quite a few decided they had had enough after the well-known Hallelujah chorus and left the performance venue, banging about loudly and slamming the doors.

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