

Translation of Klassik.com review of The Bach Choir recording of Handel choruses.

Christine Bayer: 01.11.09

“The People Shall Hear” is a typical “Best of Handel” compilation, which brings together from Handel’s works all the choir crackers which you would generally expect to find in such a production. And for that reason the reviewer must also admit that to begin with the main attraction of this CD was in fact the soloists (Carolyn Sampson and Robin Blaze), because the collection of choral pieces seemed too hackneyed and cliché-ridden. However the reviewer has had to bow to the charm of Handel’s music and confess that even such an obviously popular selection as this one can have appeal, particularly when the compositions are recorded with so much energy as here by the English Bach Choir.

From the first minute, the 220 active members of this semi-professional ensemble, under the direction of their Director David Hill, sing with immense and infectious engagement. The introductory piece “The people shall hear” from “Israel in Egypt” is sung in a wonderfully understated way, with the individual voice groups differentiated and shaded by Hill without any strident jubilation effects. Above all he seems to conceive the choir sound from the middle voices, for even though the soprano and bass sections are well produced, Hill prefers to build up the overall sound from the tenor and alto sections.

As with the choir, Hill directs the baroque orchestra, the English Concert, with a balanced mix of dry accents and lyrical vocalisation. Hill’s Handel is characterised by concise rhythms and flowing tempi, blended with an agreeable softness, permitting no harsh tones.

The two vocal soloists Sampson and Blaze are an audibly well-attuned team. The pieces “Or let the merry bells ring round”, “Let the bright seraphim” (both Sampson) and “The mighty power” (Blaze) belong to their regular repertoire, made evident in the instinctive sureness with which they present their respective solo parts. Both are vocally very good. Sampson displays a wonderful depth of timbre which she hasn’t shown so far, and Blaze knows exactly how to be economical with energy, in order to sing his solo parts with tremendous speed and radiant timbre. He holds his own next to the thunderous confidence of the choir, without succumbing to the temptation to sing likewise with all his power.

Next to the pieces already mentioned, the programme also offers the Handel-classics and the unavoidable Hallelujah chorus. The Bach Choir sings this last piece with joy in dramatic gestures, blaring fanfares and loudly booming drums.

English translation by Rachel Green