

‘Messiah’ in The Church of Holmen: The euphoria of the Hallelujah choir was suitably restrained

There is no correct way to perform Messiah. In his recurring Christmas concerts, Mogens Dahl has long made it convincing in his very own way. Again this year, it was with an English elite orchestra and the conductor's chamber choir and, among the soloists, the soprano Julia Doyle made her particularly significant mark on the performances

It was a *Messiah* of a high professional level. There were exquisite choral singing and fine soloists. One of the world's leading orchestras of its kind was there as well as a conductor in complete control of events. And he, Mogens Dahl, is the one to thank for this longstanding tradition in The Church of Holmen of inviting to an international Händel festival with musical resources, which are matched by only a few in this country.

Actually, it is really a very un-Danish way to grandstand. To give a choir your own name, to set up a concert institution on Islands Brygge and give that your own name. Maybe one needs to be born in North Jutland, in Thisted, more specifically, to be perky enough to not give a dart about the specific who-do-you-think-you-are attitude further east and, with that attitude, Mogens Dahl has enjoyed incredible success with his many projects, including *Messiah*.

To give an impression of the juxtaposition of competent forces in this year's performance, I could begin with the first violin of the London Orchestra of The Age of Enlightenment, playing on historical instruments. Rumanian-Israeli Kati Debretzeni is one of the top performers on baroque violin. In addition to this orchestra, she is the first violin for the English Baroque Orchestra under John Eliot Gardiner and, together, they have just released all of Bach's violin concertos with her as the soloist. The English Robert Varyne is one of the foremost performers on natural trumpet, a valveless instrument from Handel's time, and he demonstrated this so that hosts of angels sang. Similarly, the English Julia Doyle appeared as a soprano soloist due to a cancellation; she had been referred to in the press as a luminous, intelligent Baroque specialist and this was no lie, as you would probably say in the locality where Mogens Dahl was born. He operates with a large group of choir singers, of whom 16 from the Nordic Region and the UK had been selected, and how superbly they pulled together was impressive, especially in the last two parts of the oratory.

Toast and water

The complete *Messiah* is an exhausting affair when perched on a church bench; even when, like Mogens Dahl, one omits eight parts, but because of his predominantly quick tempo and the quick transition between parts, you do not feel completely satisfied until the end. There is no right way to perform *Messiah*; it can be heavy in the romantic style and it can be light on a historically informed basis - what an English friend of mine referred to as a *toast and water diet*. However, this last approach is prevalent today, and this is also very much the stance taken by Mogens Dahl.

Nonetheless, it was interesting that the four soloists placed themselves in precisely these two camps. Julia Doyle and German contra-tenor Benno Schachtner based in the practice of the Baroque era and Polish tenor Krystian Adam and Canadian bass Gordon Bintner with a more traditionally oriented expressiveness. For me, the best moments with the two

gentlemen were found later in the oratory.

Adam exemplary identified with the crucifixion theme in Part Two and, in particular, the aria 'The Trumpet shall sound' made a huge impression with Bintner, fuelled by Varyne's delicate virtuoso trumpet play with improvisations and lip trills.

Händel has given the alto soloist quite a dominant place. Now, the question is whether a contra-tenor - in comparison to a female also - is able to realise the deeper passages of the part in a satisfactory manner. I am one of the sceptics and there was nothing to change that. However, Schachtner did well in the central aria 'He was despised', with a light voice at the sorrowful beginning and the middle-section's compassionate commitment and agitated description of the whipping, disgrace and spitting, to which Jesus was subjected.

Observing the smiling faces of the violinists was quite touching as Julia Doyle embarked on the magnificent 'Rejoice greatly'. Because they knew that it would be a particularly enthralling duel between the soprano's colorations and their unanimous cascades of cheers, with a voice that never sounded under pressure or distressed, silky-sounding, and yet with sparkling hits at the heights. A similar distribution was later experienced in the introspective 'I know that my redeemer liveth' and, here, Doyle also sent the church soaring.

Clear and powerful

The Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir did better and better as the evening progressed. There were quick movements – maybe also too quick – where the singers found keeping up with the orchestra difficult; however, from the second part, the concentration was top-notch. Mogens Dahl masterly formed the mighty passion triptych with three choirs en suite after the aforementioned alto aria to allow the textual contents and structure of the various movement to shine clearly and tastefully. Fortunately, the Hallelujah choir did not explode in the massive pressure to which one is often exposed. On the contrary, the euphoria was sufficiently contained and the ending was dimmed rather than an explosion. However, Mogens Dahl ensured a magnificent ending to it all as the excellent orchestra and choir let loose during the last bars of the Amen choir where the church organ also contributed with a surprising reinforcement.

Händel: Messiah. International soloists, Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir and Orchestra of The Age of Enlightenment led by Mogens Dahl. 7 December at The Church of Holmen, Copenhagen.