

Magical Meeting of Masters in Viborg Cathedral

Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir was at the forefront of a unique performance of Messiah under the vaulted roof of the cathedral.

Concert

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During transmissions of significant sport events, you often hear the speaker speak of ‘an impressive backdrop’ and this usually refers to full stands with excited and screaming fans, and everything related to it.

The surroundings in which classical concerts are performed can also have a significant effect, as the visual impressions often form an important part of the experience in more way than one.

On leaving the familiar surroundings of The Church of Holmen in Copenhagen, this Sunday afternoon, the Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir took over the majestic Viborg Cathedral to perform Händel’s no less than brilliant ‘Messiah’ together with the London-based Orchestra of The Age of Enlightenment and four outstanding soloists.

It was a unique experience because the well-known tones of the biblical oratory played strangely well together with the church which is decorated with the frescos of Joakim Skovgaard, a 2600 square-metre large picture bible with colourful illustrations from both The Old and the New Testament, just like Händel’s monumental music is inspired by selected texts from both of these sources.

Messiah is almost the signature concert of Mogens Dahl’s well-tuned choir singers, four times four of their kind – sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. So, naturally, expectations were high and all seats in the church had been sold out for several days.

And, since both the orchestra, the choir and the conductor were audibly inspired by performing under the vaulted roof of the church, it was a magical meeting between images and music, right from the first few bars – a symbiosis of both great power and trembling beauty.

The supreme character of the four solo singers was, naturally, of decisive importance. The English soprano Julia Doyle had been called to stand in for Rudy Hughes, but she turned out to be such a perfect replacement that your mind turned to a popular turn of phrase from this year’s Danish parliamentary election: “the heavenly substitute”.

The German contra-tenor Benno Schachtner was a tale to himself. He recited his text with a beautiful tone and such a brilliant phrasing and emotion that one’s back almost ached when he sang the aria from Isaiah 50, 6 with the words:

“He gave His back to the smiters”, the brutal flogging of Messiah.

And such full-sounding voices that had been conjured up to fill the large room with song – and this they did, as if it were a small village church: The world-famous Polish tenor Kristian Adam and the eminent Canadian bass Gordon Bintner, both singing so sonorously as if they were a couple of Joakim Skovgaard’s

Old Testament prophets and patriarchs who had descended from the frescos. These two also interpreted the lyrics so intimately that we experienced the epic call of the Bible.

Sober-minded Jutlanders? Not on this Sunday in the Viborg Cathedral where, seconds after the final Amen choir, the audience spontaneously stood and thanked the performers with thunderous applause for a concert which will not be forgotten in a hurry by anyone attending.

Messiah performed in Viborg Cathedral by Mogens Dahl Chamber Choir and Orchestra of The Age of Enlightenment, Sunday.

Conductor: Mogens Dahl.