

## Review of Handel's Messiah

Handel's Messiah holds a unique place in the classical music world, with many of its choruses known by even those who do not regularly attend concerts. There are always high expectations, mixed with a little trepidation that expectations may not be met. The performance of Messiah at Newcastle City Hall on 9 April was the first performance for the Newcastle University Choir since the pandemic, so many would have wondered whether the artistic forces were up to the challenges presented by this work after such a long hiatus.

However, it very quickly became apparent that there was no need for nerves or trepidation, with soloists, choir and orchestra, led by Dr Christopher Allan, giving a splendid account of the work, which was rewarded with wild applause and a standing ovation. (There was applause after many of the movements as well, indicating the sense of joy elicited, in particular by some of the soloists.)

The concert began with thanks to Newcastle City Council for its sponsorship of the event, and a welcome from the Lord Mayor. The Christ Church Camerata orchestral opening and opening Brad Cooper's tenor solo were splendid, and, along with the choir's first entry *And the Glory of the Lord*, we knew we were in for a great afternoon.

Dr Christopher Allan brought all the forces together brilliantly, capitalizing on the wonderful acoustics of Newcastle City Hall, and managing to glean a clear and focused sound from Newcastle University Choir. There were some very impressive performances of some of the more challenging choruses, such as *For Unto Us a Child Is Born*. Like most large community choirs in Australia, the balance was affected by smaller numbers of tenors and basses at times, however, there was a unified sound overall and much to be very proud of.

Soprano Anna Sandström shone in everything she sang, with superb tone and judicious use of melismas showing her maturity and musicianship throughout. It was especially lovely to hear *Rejoice Greatly* in compound time, the result being far more joyous than the more commonly employed simple time.

Nicole Smeulders sang with warmth and a dark tone in all her movements, giving depth and meaning to the work. Andrew O'Connor's performance of the famous *The Trumpet Shall Sound* was suitably stirring, and Fiona Watson's trumpet shone brightly in this tour de force for the instrument.

The *Hallelujah* chorus was thrilling for everyone present – performance and audience alike – and I'm sure many had to resist the urge to sing along. I was proud to stand at the end of the performance for the well-deserved ovation.

*Kim Sutherland*

*After a tumultuous two years for the arts, it was wonderfully fitting to co-present and support such an uplifting and pertinent piece as the Messiah. The universal theme of suffering and resurrection could not be more relevant as we emerged from months of lockdown and restrictions.*

*With so much uncertainty about whether people would have an appetite to return to live performance, it was gratifying to see the Concert Hall full of appreciative smiling faces. The City of Newcastle and the Civic Theatre acknowledge the diversity and richness of local culture and its importance in connecting our community. It is as vital as ever that our local performing arts industry feels supported as it is for many, the thing that nurtures and encourages us to prosper during adversity. It was a joy to work with the Newcastle University Choir – in my humble opinion, a goldmine of talent!*

Leonie Wallace  
Manager Civic Theatre