

classical music in the upper valley

Beautiful Performance of *The Messiah* at the Hop

The Handel Society of Dartmouth College marked the start of the Christmas season with a performance of George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* at Spaulding Auditorium of the HOP Center on November 30. Robert Duff led the chorus, soloists and orchestra in a beautifully realized and deeply moving traversal of the beloved oratorio before a capacity audience.

Since coming to Dartmouth in 2004, Duff has brought the Handel Society to new levels of excellence, as was evident in its outstanding work this particular evening. The chorus is integral in an oratorio, expanding on and clarifying the solo aria which precedes each chorus. The Handel Society singers acquitted themselves admirably, singing with commendable textual clarity, sensitivity, fine tone quality, rhythmic precision and control of dynamics. Any chorus can sing loudly; not all can sing softly and very softly. These singers can.

Duff assembled an impressive group of soloists – soprano Joelle Harvey, countertenor Reginald Mobley, tenor Derek Chester and baritone Sumner Thompson, all well along on their way to important careers. Ms. Harvey has a radiant voice and used it to great advantage throughout. Her diction was exemplary and her voice secure throughout its range. She captured the excitement and anticipation of "Rejoice Greatly" and the beauty and hope of "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" ideally.

Instead of a contralto or mezzo soprano, Duff chose a countertenor, Reginald Mobley. Countertenors are falsetti, in that they sing in a falsetto voice, unlike castrati, thankfully no longer extant, who sang with natural voices, although attained by unnatural means. They supported their voices from the chest, which a falsetti does not, having only the head voice to offer. I have always preferred a contralto or mezzo soprano as soloist in *Messiah*, though contraltos today are a rare breed; gone are the days of Kathleen Ferrier, Maureen Forrester, Helen Watts and Yvonne Minton.

That said, Mobley made a very strong case for a countertenor role. His voice had a welcome heft, lovely tone and his diction was impeccable. I would guess that his natural voice is baritone. He sang with warmth and conviction and made extensive and imaginative use of embellishments, which are a sort of an elaborate improvisation on the part of the singer intended to enhance the music. All the

soloists used embellishments intelligently and to good effect.

Tenor Derek Chester is well experienced as an oratorio soloist, having studied oratorio performance as a music major in college and appearing internationally with many well known ensembles and conductors. He demonstrated a thorough grasp of baroque style. His is not a big voice and was a bit grainy on this night, as well as somewhat constricted at the top of his range. However his spirited, sensitive delivery of the music and text was compelling, as was his fine command.

Like the other soloists, baritone Sumner Thompson is well on his way to an important career. His big, mellifluous voice was well suited to meet the demands of his recitatives and arias. In his lowest range the voice could be fuzzy at times, mostly in the later stages of the performance, but on the whole he gave an excellent account of himself. His "The Trumpet Shall Sound" was noteworthy, as was the brilliant playing of the trumpet part by Steve Banzaert, who played it from memory.

Dr. Duff recruited an absolutely first rate group of 27 instrumentalists for the orchestra and maintained an ideal balance between players, chorus and soloists.

The orchestra's intonation was admirable, as was the harpsichord continuo provided by Evelyn Zuckerman.

This was among the best *Messiahs* I have heard in several decades of reviewing music, and I have heard scores and scores of them, including some god-awful ones. There was a spontaneity and commitment to this performance that made it truly special.