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CLASSICAL

CHURCH HAILS THE MESSIAH

A quartet of classy soloists and a top director are to perform a real favourite, writes Eric Snape



■ John Naylor, musical director of Nantwich Choral Society.

Though not heard so much these days, Messiah remains most people's favourite oratorio and it will be a real pleasure to hear it performed in the beautiful and acoustically rich surroundings of St Mary's Church at Nantwich.

And it should be well worth the hearing. There's a quartet of classy soloists, a top-rank musical director, John Naylor – who made an acclaimed debut conducting the Nantwich society in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* – and the 18th Century Concert Orchestra in accompaniment.

John Naylor, who was appointed musical director of Nantwich Choral Society in September 2005, combines the arts of conductor, singer and organist, and has gained wide experience with many world-class choirs. After a successful business career he now devotes most of activities to choral conducting and choir development. Soprano soloist Janet Ollier started singing lessons at the age of nine, and subsequently studied at the Royal Northern College of Music. She has sung in church choirs, Cheshire Girls Choir, Cheshire Youth Choir (where she met her husband), Enfield Choral Society, the London Oriana Choir, the

Collegiate Singers and, since 1989, has been with the Lydian Singers.

Mezzo-soprano Susan Marrs graduated from Trinity College of Music, London, in 1993 after winning the Ricordi Opera Prize and the Trinity College Singing Department Prize. Susan has enjoyed 12 years as a member of the Extra Chorus at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and recent performances there have included Wagner's *Parsifal*, Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

Tenor Stephen Newlove was born in East Yorkshire and sang as a chorister in Beverley Minster before studying for a music degree at Huddersfield. As an experienced cathedral singer in the choirs of York Minster and Chester Cathedral, he has broadcast on radio and television and featured in a number of acclaimed recordings.

Bass Jamie Hall, was also born in Yorkshire and is now based at Chester. He combines continuing study in voice with solo and ensemble singing as well as vocal coaching and choral directing.

■ The performance at St Mary's Church in Nantwich takes place on Saturday, February 3, starting at 7pm.

Choral society revives a classic

NANTWICH Choral Society has resurrected Messiah.

A firm favourite, they have decided to bring back one of Handel's finest pieces of work for this Saturday's concert at St Mary's Church.

Spokesperson Maire Peddler hopes the revival will attract a large audience.

"For many years, the Choral Society performed the Messiah annually," she explained.

"However our audiences and we have had a rest from it for a few years whilst we have been presenting in its place other equally exciting musical works.

"However we are bringing out afresh this ever-popular Handel favourite, conducted by our new Musical Director, with a quartet of soloists who are well known to us and our patrons and an orchestra which has supported the society on a number of recent occasions.

"We hope to attract a good audience and maybe a full church for the event."

The concert starts at 7pm this Saturday, February 3. Tickets are £10 or £8 concessions and available from Sounds Musical, 72 Hospital Street, 01270 625579.

Also try the Tourist Information Centre, Civic Hall or St Mary's Church Shop.

Messiah at St Mary's

NANTWICH Choral Society presents an 18th Century concert at St Mary's Church on Saturday. Handel's *Messiah* will feature Janet Ollier (soprano), Susan Marrs (contralto), Stephen Newlove (tenor) and Jamie Hall (bass), directed by John Naylor.

The concert starts at 7pm. Tickets, from £8 to £10, are available from the Tourist Information Centre at Nantwich Civic Hall, St Mary's Church shop and Sounds Musical in Hospital Street, which can be contacted on 01270 625579.

The Nantwich Choral Society will perform Handel's Messiah in St Mary's Church Nantwich on Saturday 3rd February 2007 at 7.30pm. Soloists: Janet Ollier, Soprano; Susan Marrs, Contralto; Stephen Newlove, Tenor; Jamie Hall, Bass and The 18th Century Concert Orchestra. Conductor John Naylor. Tickets: £10 (£8 concessions) from Box Office: Sounds Musical 01270 625579 Nantwich TIC and St Mary's Church, Nantwich. Or visit our website www.nantwichchoral.org.uk

Nantwich Choral Soc.

■ A CAPACITY audience filled Nantwich Parish Church for a performance of Handel's great oratorio *Messiah* 3/2/07

The performers were Janet Ollier (soprano), Susan Marrs (mezzo-soprano), Stephen Newlove (tenor), Jamie Hall (bass) with Nantwich Choral Society and the 18th Century Concert Orchestra. The performance was conducted by John Naylor.

Handel wrote *Messiah* in an amazingly short burst of inspiration between August 22 and September 12, 1741 in preparation for a series of concerts he was to give in Dublin.

It is possible that he may have passed close to Nantwich on his way to give the first performance. He had to board a ship at Parkgate on the Wirral but was held up by bad weather so stayed a while in Chester.

While there he managed to persuade the cathedral organist and choir to give the piece a preliminary 'sing through'. It seems that he was rather put out when one of the singers explained his very poor account of the music by stating that although he could sing at sight he couldn't sing 'at first sight'.

The Dublin performance was a great success but the work was less well received in London where it was first performed in the spring of 1742. However from the 1750s onwards *Messiah* quickly established itself as the most popular and often performed choral work in the repertoire.

The familiarity of *Messiah* to both performers and audience alike plus its considerable technical difficulties means that it's quite a tricky piece to bring off convincingly.

It's all too easy to make it sound perfunctory or simply fail to overcome the technical difficulties. Fortunately, this was

not the case in this performance when everyone involved excelled themselves.

Under Mr Naylor's direction the work received a thoroughly convincing performance. It was well paced, sometimes dramatic and urgent but also intimate and tender as the occasion demanded.

All four soloists sang with great sensitivity and conviction and the choral singing was clear and direct, entirely in keeping with the baroque scale of the overall performance.

The 18th Century Concert Orchestra gave exemplary support, playing throughout with grace and style. Although it is invidious to single out players, it does seem right to mention Adrian Woodward's immaculate playing of the trumpet obligato in *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, it was altogether a most rewarding and enjoyable performance.

■ Nantwich Choral Society's next concert will be on Saturday, March 24, at Nantwich Parish Church. The programme will consist of the setting of the *Requiem* by Faure, *Five Mystical Songs* by Vaughan Williams and Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*.

Superb way to get a Handel on a classic

Classical Review

Nantwich Choral Society
St Mary's Church, Nantwich

MESSIAH was first performed on April 13, 1742, in Dublin, and there's always been speculation that Handel might have stopped off at Nantwich on his way from London to Chester, where he was to catch the boat to Ireland.

Be that as it may, he would certainly have liked the manner in which Nantwich Choral Society rendered his great oratorio at St Mary's Church in the town on Saturday night.

Forces, including period instruments, were almost identical to those used on that illustrious Dublin debut. And the performance was genuinely 18th century, without a whiff of the romanticism that has so often marred it since. *Messiah* is obviously a Nantwich Choral Society

party-piece. They clearly know it through and through, and follow their light and resilient conductor, John Naylor, without a hitch. The result was wonderfully fresh and bright, and there was no hint of the miniaturisation that can sometimes accompany small-scale performances. The conductor's crispness came over, too, in the radiant singing of the team of soloists - soprano Janet Ollier, mezzo-soprano Susan Marrs, tenor Stephen Newlove and bass Jamie Hall.

The 18th Century Concert Orchestra have become firmly established as some of the finest exponents of baroque music in the country since their foundation in 2001, and they undoubtedly enhanced their reputation by the way in which they added to the authenticity of Nantwich Choral Society's *Messiah*.

Eric Snape