

# A MEDITATIVE 'MESSIAH' AT ST. GEORGE'S

"MESSIAH" persists still, 230 years after its inspired conception in the mind of Handel, as one of the great pillars of the choral repertoire. It has survived many vicissitudes of performance by choirs good, bad and indifferent, of "edited" editions, of added instrumentation, and of assessments of its audience response of which I feel I must quote one by an eminent music critic in 1909: "The stupendous masterpiece in which Handel released Christianity from the bondage of fact, and wrote the romance of human redemption in characters of immortal fire, is now degraded to the level of a mild digestive which helps the struggling Nonconformist conscience to tide over the festivities of Christmas. The ceremony of attending a performance of Messiah is to the average Englishman as immutable a Christmas institution as going to church or eating a slice of turkey."

## CONCENTRATION

One hopes that the audience (substitute congregation if you wish) which practically filled St. George's Church, Stevenage, on Saturday night for the performance by Stevenage Choral Society and the professional Stevenage String Orchestra will repudiate that adumbration of their motives by Richard Alexander Streatfield. I would prepared to do so on behalf of most of them because the impression I received was one of intense concentrated listening.

Of conductors' approaches to the work there seem to be a great many judging by the number of times I have heard "Messiah" in more than 50 years and, without being too dogmatic, more than one can find warrant for in the score itself.

Whether Peter Wigfield, who

conducted this performance intended his approach to be meditational—there would seem to be licence for it in Charles Jennen's text drawn so largely from Old Testament prophets and the Psalms—I do not know, but that was the feeling that it gave me, though I felt at times that some of the choruses could have

been taken a little faster without detriment to the meditational feeling.

Having offered that criticism, with good intent, and making known a personal preference for harpsichord rather than organ (no criticism of the un-named player is intended or implied), I found much to like in this performance.

It was good to hear all three parts of the work in one evening, the singing in general was very good, the orchestra (led by Diana Baker) gave excellent support, with Malcolm Holloway's trumpet in fine fettle, and the soloists Sally Le Sage (soprano), Sarah Walker (contralto), Peter Hall (tenor) and Clifford Parkes (bass) in good voice, though at the beginning not all the words reached the back of the church undimmed.

The Handelian runs were taken confidently both by soloists and chorus.  
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