

Seasonal wonders with large chorus

Roderic Dunnett hears
Bach in Nottingham

THE glorious rhythmic assurance with which "*Jauchzet, frohlocket*", the opening chorus of Bach's 1734 *Christmas Oratorio*, burst upon the audience in the enabling acoustic of St Mary's, Nottingham, suggested that here, perhaps, was a choral society of outstanding quality.

Indeed, every contribution the Nottingham Bach Choir made from then on confirmed that this was the case. Here was a large chorus in which all four voices were strong, fine-tuned, and capable of delivering even dauntingly exposed leads with confidence and finesse.

One of the most pleasing factors was the way in which the conductor, Paul Hale, organist of Southwell Minster, achieved perfectly judged *ritenuti* time and again from his soloists, from an attentive orchestra, and from the whole choir. Hale's paces felt constantly right: for the words, for Bach's music, and for the forces employed. Even where the music suddenly hotted up, as at the chorus's "*Ehre sei Gott*" ("Glory to God in the highest"), all voices proved reliable and alert.

This performance, rich in musical imagination, embraced Parts 1 to 3 and Part 6 of the half-dozen cantatas that Bach welded together. Essentially, the narrative and comment rests with the four solo roles; but here results were more mixed. The tenor, David Watkin-Holmes, was unwell, necessitating the omission of two arias, and the making of

allowances. Some of the Evangelist's recitative felt audibly flat. Yet, curiously, it was he who was the most pliant singer of the four, preserving the natural flow of the words, often embracing high notes accurately, and at all times sensitive to the dynamic rise and fall of Bach's music.

The others all displayed a tendency to overload. The alto, Simon Clulow (a former head chorister of St Mary's), in "*Bereite dich, Zion*", produced a forced tone, even slightly shrieky, inclining to snatch awkwardly at individual words or high notes and with a fondness for gratuitous *portamento*. Even "*Schlafe, mein Liebster*" was not spared. Infinitely more attractive was his "*Schliesse, mein Herze*", where restraint made a world of difference: reined in, he produces a remarkably nice sound.

The soprano, Faye Newton, was not exonerated, either, even though "*Nur ein Wink*" ("The Lord crushes his enemies") clearly demands a forceful delivery. Far more engaging was her duet with the bass in Part 3 ("*Herr, dein Mitleid, dein Erbarmen*"), which, with oboes and bassoons, plus more attractive *ritenuto*, proved enchanting.

The bass, Canadian-born Greg Skidmore, emerged best: mostly loud, but without bizarre overemphases, and often finely phrased. His delivery was commanding, his musicianship was telling, and the assured sound carried well to the back of a packed St Mary's. Thanks not least to some faultless trumpets and haunting oboe-playing in the pastoral sequence of Part 2, this thoughtful, spirited performance proved truly fine and memorable.