

Just made for Christmas

CONCERT

The Childhood of Christ (Berlioz)
UWA Choral Society
Winthrop Hall
Review: Neville Cohn

Unlike Handel's ubiquitous Messiah, which ranges in content from the birth of Jesus to Calvary and the Resurrection, Berlioz's oratorio is concerned solely with the infancy of Jesus and the flight to Egypt. In this sense, it is far more appropriate for Christmastide than Handel's celebrated oratorio.

Burhan Guner presided over the UWA Choral Society's account of Berlioz's masterpiece, lavishing as much care on its exquisite instrumentation as on the singing of the choir.

By focusing on the inherently meditative, pastoral quality of the writing, Guner's direction revealed the lyrical grace of a good deal of the work. The brass section was in particularly good form, as was Anne Henderson (bassoon). Flautists Michael Howell and Hayley Rowntree and harpist Catherine Ashley did well in their pivotal trio.

Much of the choral singing was of high standard but, although the

chorus of angels, sung in the front foyer, provided an agreeably stereophonic quality to the proceedings, there were some problems with intonation.

For the most part, though, the choristers came up trumps, giving point and meaning to some of Berlioz's often touchingly beautiful writing.

Soprano Penelope Reynolds was consistently in character as Mary, as was Robert Hoffmann as both Herod and the Ishmaelite who gives the Holy Family shelter in Egypt. Mark Alderson, too, rose to the occasion in a most expressive way as Joseph. And after a less than convincing start, Stuart Laing came across as a most impressive narrator.

Sung in English, diction, on the part of both choristers and vocal soloists, was not always as clear as one might have hoped — but the consistent sincerity of the singing compensated for this in large measure.

Throughout, Guner set tempi which were invariably sensible and meaningful.

This was the first performance in Perth of Berlioz's masterpiece in more than 25 years. It deserves to be heard far more frequently.