

Simply messianic

CONCERT

Oratorio: Handel's Messiah
UWA Choral Society Winthrop Hall
Sunday, December 23
Review: Neville Cohn

How refreshing, for once, to hear Handel's oratorio *Messiah* in a format one might have encountered in the composer's day. During the Victorian era, in particular, it became fashionable to muster literally hundreds of choristers and a bloated orchestra with a very big brass section which would have been the antithesis of Handel's intentions.

Instead, at the weekend, conductor Burhan Guner presided over a modestly sized instrumental ensemble that ran to 17 strings, a couple of oboes, a bassoon and two trumpets, a line-up very close to that which Handel himself conducted in London in 1742. No organ was used then, neither was it at Winthrop Hall as its McGillivray organ has been removed for renovation. The absence of the latter brought the harpsichord more into the limelight and throughout the evening, Jango Chapkhana accompanied the recitatives meticulously and invariably within the line and contour of Handelian style.

I cannot recall hearing the UWA Choral Society to better effect. Guner drew a fine response from his forces. For much of the evening, Guner secured from both choir and orchestra a buoyancy of momentum and, crucially, a transparency of tonal textures that made for most satisfying listening.

Choir and orchestra did wonders with *He trusted in God*, its contrapuntal intricacies essayed in a most meaningful way. It was a thrilling moment. And an account of *Behold the Lamb of God* was in the best sense majestic.

There were some departures from this excellence. Choral intonation wavered noticeably in *Since by man came death*. But even when, rarely, too rapid a pace was adopted — as in *All we like sheep* — mood rather than minutiae prevailed to pleasing effect. This was also apparent in the bassaria *Why do the nations in which*, despite some fuzziness of detail, good old-fashioned showmanship carried the day.

Vocal soloists were well up to the mark. Soprano Jennifer Barrington's singing of *Come unto Him* was deeply affecting as was her account of *How beautiful are the feet*. And Sarah-Janet Dougiamas was splendidly expressive in *But who may abide*. Baritone James Clayton did well, too, clothing in ringing tone the notes of his recitative *Thus saith the Lord*.

As ever, an audience that filled Winthrop Hall to near-capacity came to its feet in the *Hallelujah Chorus* during which the lights came up to bathe the venue in radiance; it was a moving interlude. The so-called *Pastoral Symphony* disappointed, though; it bordered on the perfunctory.