

# Alabama Symphony's 'Messiah' reinvigorated by British conductor David Lockington

By Michael Huebner -- The Birmingham News

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David Lockington, conductor  
Birmingham Concert Chorale  
Amanda Forsythe, soprano  
Margaret Lattimore, mezzo-soprano  
Garrett Sorenson, tenor  
Michael Dean, bass-baritone

Friday, Alys Stephens Center  
Repeats Sunday at 7:30 p.m.  
"Messiah" singalong Saturday at 7 p.m.

A surefire way to avoid the doldrums of repeated "Messiah" performances is to book guest conductors. In fact, the last time the Alabama Symphony had one of its own conduct the complete oratorio was 2002, with former music director Richard Westerfield. The succession of visitors has yielded a intriguing array, from the bold Robert Shaw sound resurrected by William Fred Scott in 2004 and 2005 to the spare period stylings and pared forces implemented by Martin Pearlman in 2006.

Last year's exhilarating performance from the baton of Raymond Leppard engaged the mind, ear and soul, and will be hard to top. But Friday's second successive rendition from a British conductor came close. Dartford, England-born David Lockington, now the music director of the Grand Rapids (Mich.) Symphony, managed to narrow the 120 singers in the Birmingham Concert Chorale down to a limpid focus, at least a good bit of the time. Sweetly-intoned turns and ornaments from the ASO strings and solid dramatics from the vocal soloists enhanced and invigorated the two hours of music. Restrained, at times understated, Lockington assembled a compact instrument that could negotiate vigorous tempos, then melt into softly lyrical arias.

Bass-baritone Michael Dean stood out for his lean and precise melismas, particularly in the aria, "Why do the nations so furiously rage." Soprano Amanda Forsythe possesses the perfect oratorio voice -- light, yet penetrating, with a dulcet radiance and true understanding of Baroque performance. Tenor Garrett Sorenson tended toward the high side of pitches and strained in the upper register. Margaret Lattimore's dusky mezzo was impressive in several numbers, but could have used more passion in "He was despised."

Always a steadfast player, principal trumpet John McElroy was particularly outstanding in high piccolo trumpet parts during the "Hallelujah" chorus and "The trumpet shall sound." The ever taken-for-granted continuo, consisting of harpsichord, portable organ, bassoon, cello and bass, provided a solid foundation.

Lockington's generally lean approach worked to dramatic effect in the difficult choral melismas, the "Hallelujah" chorus in Part Two and "Worthy is the Lamb" and "Amen" in Part Three. It allowed an otherwise vocal cord-weary group to benefit from a second wind, bringing singular power and beauty to choruses that too often are driven by volume.