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Hallelujah for Pearlman's 'Messiah'

By **MICHAEL HUEBNER**
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What a difference a year makes.

The last two Decembers, William Fred Scott led the Alabama Symphony, Birmingham Concert Chorale and soloists in truncated, disjointed renditions of Handel's "Messiah" that disappointed on many fronts. Enter energetic Baroque-era stylist Martin Pearlman with a sleek, kinetic and mostly complete version of the venerable oratorio. It riveted from beginning to end.

With the string section streamlined to 23 for Friday's concert and playing with unusual conviction, the ASO's sound began to approach that of a Baroque orchestra.

Four vocalists from the Pearlman camp (the Boston Baroque conductor performs or records with all of them) provided stellar solos.

Soprano Tamara Matthews is the consummate Handelian soprano. Her free-flowing melismas and improvised ornaments unfolded artfully, enhanced by a creamy, full-bodied sound reminiscent of Kathleen Battle. As fine a reading as she gave the Part 1 aria, "Rejoice Greatly," it was eclipsed by her heart-rending, sigh-inducing "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" in Part 3.

Stephen Powell's bold, booming baritone asserted itself from the start, but he was truly inspiring in the Part 3 "The Trumpet Shall Sound." Trumpeter John McElroy's declamatory solo colored the aria with a heavenly glint.

Tenor Don Frazure's "Every Valley Shall Be Exalted," intoned with lightness and precision, was a highlight of Part 1. Alto Ann McMahon Quintero was barely audible at first, but

★★★★★

ALABAMA SYMPHONY HANDEL, "MESSIAH"

Martin Pearlman, guest conductor
Birmingham Concert Chorale
Tamara Matthews, Ann McMahon
Quinter,
Don Frazure and Stephen Powell,
soloists

Friday
Alys Stephens Center

she strengthened to reveal a chocolatey tone by the work's end.

What put this over the top of most "Messiah" performances was the Mark Ridings-trained Birmingham Concert Chorale. Given extra rehearsals with Pearlman during the week, the 40 singers made a remarkable adaptation to period style.

They weren't as loud as they have been previously, but they didn't need to be. Their position in the back of the Jemison Concert Hall stage (instead of in the choral balcony) brought them a few feet from Pearlman and the harpsichord, giving the entire ensemble a close, intimate sound. That enabled the chorus to negotiate Pearlman's demanding tempos with ease and fluidity.

A spate of fine details contributed to the concert's success. The orchestral ebbs and surges, crisp choral enunciation, minimal string vibrato, conversational solos and attentive continuo playing between Pearlman, on harpsichord, and cellist Warren Samples, all brought out the oratorio's sorrow, passion, ferocity, power and jubilation. It came to a head in the "Hallelujah" chorus, but was taken to transcendence in Part 3 with the purity and pathos of "Since By Man Came Death" and triumphant "Amen" chorus.

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