

# ASO, chorus plod through mundane 'Messiah'

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MICHAEL HUEBNER  
News Staff Writer



Annual performances of Handel's "Messiah" are becoming harder and harder to predict. Options range from the historical informed to the romantically inclined, opening a vast palette of possible interpretations.

Guest conductor Scott Yoo's vision of the Baroque masterpiece Friday night leaned toward romantic grandeur, with snatches of period authenticity thrown in. All well and good, but within that framework, the focus was blurred.

A full complement of strings from the Alabama Symphony and 80-plus singers from the Birmingham Concert Chorale could have lifted this performance to ecstasy. Instead, it barely reached past the mundane. For much of the oratorio, the chorus seemed to be flailing like a rudderless ship. The orchestra fared better, though its excitement level was at a low ebb compared with last year's tight rendition under conductor Martin Pearlman.

An urgent rhythmic drive in the strings at the beginning of the Sinfonia soon gave way to to plodding tempos in the chorus, "And the Glory of the Lord." Mushy pitch centers in the sopranos plagued "For unto us a Child is Born." The text, "Wonderful, Councillor" should be a declamation, not a mere sing-through. The placid "Pifa," for orchestra alone, was too loud for its pastoral intentions.

There were several highlights to offset the mediocrity, the most compelling being Angela Horn's dramatic "He was Despised." The mezzo-soprano hung on every word of the aria, delivering phrase after phrase with startling intensity. Soprano Ilana Davidson sang with a celestial grace and suppleness that, despite its lightness, managed to project nicely over the orchestra. Bass Christophoren Nomura boomed out his solos like Don Giovanni (one of his specialties), and shined in "The Trumpet Shall Sound" with the always assured John McElroy on piccolo trumpet. Tenor Brian Downen's nervous vibrato and thin tone were more than a little distracting.

By Part 3 of the oratorio, the chorus was in fine voice, the ambitious tenors leading the way in the glorious "Worthy of the Lamb." That momentum was, unfortunately, lost in the "Amen," chorus, which nearly came undone before rallying to a dignified close.