

Sunday, December 20, 1998

CLASSICAL REVIEW

Singers fortify 'Messiah'

Bach Society choir fills out lean music

By OLIN CHISM

Staff Critic of The Dallas Morning News

Handel's *Messiah* is to music what Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* is to dance: a hallowed Christmas tradition that companies perform because there's a built-in audience and people attend because it's the custom and because it's beautiful. That last adjective shouldn't be forgotten by those scornful of tradition; neither work could have retained its popularity without extraordinary substance.

The Dallas Bach Society's *Messiah* is an 18-year tradition and the performance of choice in Dallas this season. It was presented Saturday afternoon at the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center with soprano Lucy Tamez Creech, alto Donna Johnson, tenor Kim Childs and bass Curtis Streetman as the soloists and James Richman conducting from the harpsichord.

After generations of largescaled *Messiahs*, the trend nowadays is to smaller ones. That's certainly true of the Dallas Bach Society. Its *Messiah* choir has 24 singers, its orchestra 21 members. Compare that with the 275 singers and 250 players who performed in Westminster Abbey in 1784 on the 25th anniversary of Handel's death, or the 3,225 musicians who performed the *Messiah* at the Crystal Palace in London in 1859.

While no one wants a bloated *Messiah*, not everyone is happy with the authentic-performance trend. To such people, Saturday's orchestral sound, while lean and pure, would also be thought anemic, especially as the players avoided vibrato, which can lend a kind of richness to string sound.

The human voice has an inherent richness that negates this danger, especially with a group of fine musicians such as the Dallas Bach Society's choristers. The choir is the real protagonist of Handel's *Messiah*, and it was a forceful one in this case.

The soloists were an asset as well. Particularly appealing was the bass of Mr. Streetman, a young man who combines forcefulness with beauty of tone, not to mention solid low notes. Ms. Creech's bell-like soprano also is remarkably agile, as a fast-paced and cleanly sung "Rejoice greatly" demonstrated.

Mr. Richman is a strong leader due much of the credit for how short this three-hour afternoon seemed.