

De Cou Brings Fresh Ideas to NSO's 'Messiah'

By TIM PAGE

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One of the tests of a masterpiece is its ability to withstand many disparate interpretations. Handel's "Messiah" can be presented by a huge chorus or by a mere handful of singers, with or without organ and harpsichord, with its music for alto sung by a man or by a woman. The late conductor Sir Thomas Beecham even rearranged it to throw cymbals and xylophone into the mix.

Last night at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall, the National Symphony Orchestra presented the first of four performances of its annual rendition of "Messiah," under the direction of Emil de Cou. Breaking the interpretation down to barest essentials, it might be described as a large chorus, small orchestra, organ and occasional harpsichord, male alto "Messiah," with a blessed absence of cymbals and xylophones.

De Cou's conducting was the highlight of the evening. He kept things moving at a brisk but never hurried pace and found all sorts of intricate detail in Handel's orchestration without letting it overcome the score's dramatic essentialism. He had some original ideas - having much of the chorus sit out most of "Hallelujah," for example, inviting them in only when he wanted an especially joyful noise - and his affection for this wonderful score was unmistakable (even though, as usual, vast sections of the second and third parts were cut out).

The Washington Chorus is passing through a bad period, however. Its diction was often mushy, too many of its entrances sounded sloppy and under-rehearsed, and there was a general lack of focus throughout the evening.

The soloists, too, were a mixed bag. I admired Andrew Tortise's high, clean tenor voice and fastidious artistry. Soprano Amel Brahim-Djelloul piped sweetly but without much affect. Curtis Streetman has an agreeably woolly bass voice and an agile command of scalar passages.

A young man named Charles Lyon Stewart sang the passages about the angelic annunciation in a piercingly pure boy soprano voice. And I recognized countertenor Xavier Sabata's merits — his distinctively plaintive sound, his emotional urgency, his careful attention to detail — without much liking his work, which seemed precious, attenuated and a little hooty. But some of this is personal prejudice, for I think I could skip through life quite merrily without ever hearing "He was despised" sung by a man again. Bring back the matronly Victorian contraltos of yesteryear, say I!

The music, of course, is wonderful, but I hope that those who love "Messiah" will give some of the other Handel oratorios a chance. (Might we hear "Theodora" in Washington someday?)

The program will be repeated tonight and tomorrow night at 8, with a final performance at 1 p.m. Sunday.