

# Exuberant 'Messiah' rings under young conductor

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True masterpieces thrive on interpretation. Pittsburgh Symphony guest conductor Julian Wachner brought fresh perspectives to Friday evening's performance of George Frideric Handel's "Messiah."

"Messiah" -- the most popular piece of classical Christmas music -- was actually written for Easter, but the buoyancy and ultimately optimistic spirit of Handel's music fits the winter holiday.

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The opening of the concert, a brisk account of the first part of the Sinfonia, showed Wachner's awareness of contemporary musicology, but most of the rest of the performance went beyond scholarship to meaningful musical rhetoric based on the verbal text. And the main portion of the Sinfonia was at a fairly standard tempo.

Tenor Daniel Weeks began the singing adequately, but no more, with the recitative "Comfort ye, my people" and aria "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted." He coped well enough with the Handel's notes as well as added ornamentation, but was emotionally stiff.

The performance hit its stride with the chorus "And the Glory of the Lord," with the Mendelssohn

Choir singing with impressive exuberances achieved with clarity of rhythm and line.

The choir was small, 47 voices, as was the orchestra of 24 musicians including keyboard player -- plus occasionally two trumpets and timpani.

Heinz Hall is a big hall, but there was ample power when needed because Wachner maintained a smart dynamic range with real softness for dramatic effect and to be considerate of the solo voices. Contrast as much as bulk can create a feeling of power.

Bass-baritone Michael Dean was an impressive singer to encounter, with plenty of amplitude through the range Handel demands and with potent dramatic emphasis.

While soprano Joanna Mongiardo was a fine soloist, Handel actually assigns a larger role to mezzo-soprano. Margaret Lattimore's solid lower register was telling, as was her verbal emphasis and impressive legato.

Wachner's preference for bouncy fast tempi was almost invariably effective, apart from a few passages of rapid choral singing at medium volume which were dry. But the joy in "For unto us a child is born" was irresistible.

The conductor's sensitivity to text produced many remarkable moments in slower music, too, including the end of "All we like sheep have gone astray."

In any music, but especially in longer works, it is the interpreter's handling of contrast that sustains freshness. Wachner, 37, is a conductor on the rise.

