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'Messiah' with Philadelphia Orchestra, Singers

By David Patrick Stearns
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To love Handel's Messiah is to be its watchdog.

Far from wearing out its welcome, Messiah's stature has grown continually: As Handel's other works are heard more often, the consistency and uniqueness of this perennial become increasingly apparent. Messiah remains a warhorse, but you don't want it kissed off with minimal rehearsal and inexpensive soloists, which was a possibility Sunday at the Kimmel Center, when the Philadelphia Orchestra initially seemed to be fielding its B team.

I hadn't heard of any of the guest musicians. **But few conductors have drawn such focused, committed and meticulous music-making from the Philadelphia Singers Chorale as Julian Wachner, who has extensive choral experience in Boston and had a better-defined viewpoint than some higher-profile conductors who have taken on the piece here. He created the kind of musical framework that ensured that the weaker links would not significantly diminish the overall picture.**

Given how well he assembled a fine performance in limited time, I couldn't help fantasize that he might do an annual Philadelphia Orchestra festival of Bach and Handel, since these giants in music history suffer from lack of representation in this community. That's not unusual: Those composers tend to be left to period-performance specialists, whether or not they're on the premises. And although I champion period performance more than most, Sunday's generalist Messiah required no handicaps.

Orchestral introductions to fugal passages were skillfully phrased to telegraph the meaning to come. Individual fugal voices were initially inflected to consolidate that poetic meaning. From there, Wachner built the music, line by line, as an architectural edifice, serving both the music's emotional and more purely aesthetic elements.

Wachner's brisk, exciting choral tempos didn't necessarily carry over into the arias, in which tempos seemed to be designed to accommodate the varying comfort zones of the vocal soloists. That's reality this time of year, when seemingly everybody this side of Renée Fleming who can sing Messiah is indeed doing so with an if-today-is-Thursday-it-must-be-Tulsa velocity. Stylistic congruent soloists may just be too much to hope for.

As much as David Kravitz's baritone was refreshingly clean, the voice didn't have much to say artistically. Soprano Sarah Coburn, a handsome presence and good singer, had much to say but not the enunciation to project it. For all of her Wagner credits, mezzo-soprano Laura Vlasak Nolen still suits Handel thanks to her projection of the words and endearing Nan Merriman vibrato.

Tenor William Hite was in his own class, not just because his medium-weight voice was ideal. His vocal ornaments were thoughtfully deployed to either emphasize or elaborate on what the music was saying. Something bigger was afoot, though: He didn't perform the music so much as he shared the profound experience he was having with it. That's what I call the Christmas spirit.