

Rapturous Messiah performance

► MESSIAH

by Georg Friedrich Handel
Palmerston North Choral Society and
Manawatu Sinfonia
Regent on Broadway, Saturday,
December 5
Reviewed by Christopher Abbey

Cards, crackers, cakes, trees, puddings – everyday words that adhere comfortably to the word “Christmas”. Synonymous with Christmas alone is the word “carol”, which chorally proclaims the festive season.

Last Saturday, celebrating their 90th anniversary, the Palmerston North Choral Society heralded Christmas with its stirring presentation of Handel's *Messiah*.

Our majestic Regent on Broadway's acoustic screened tiered concert setting welcomed a near capacity audience as musical director Alison Stewart, resplendent in a cloak of many colours, raised her arms and the youthful 31-strong Manawatu Sinfonia launched into the overture to this most enduring sacred oratorio.

Setting the scene, John Beaglehole's

splendid effortless tenor recitative and air assembled a platform for the first stirring chorus. Despite being seated until midway through part 2, his fervent delivery of two further airs clinched a stirring performance.

The bass part was beautifully sung by Roger Wilson in his 55th performance of the role. Experience and perfect diction gilded a fine voice.

Alto Ellen Barrett, who sang this role in the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit four years ago, was deceptively relaxed in a compelling appearance where her controlled singing instilled clarity and vision to the thoughts behind the music and lyrics.

Finally, soprano Pepe Becker rose to launch the pastoral recitative. Her sweet renditions of her airs, especially at the start of part 3 and her duet with Ellen Barrett, were delightful.

The Manawatu Sinfonia is one of our city's many musical assets. The strength and clarity of the strings encompassing the tinkling harpsichord of Roy Tankersley gave outstanding accompaniment for the ensemble. Notable too were David Maas's sparkling trumpet solos. Orchestra, soloists

and choirs combined in reaching an unforgettable final chorus: “For ever and ever. Amen.”

For this reviewer, though, the choir is the show. The Choral Society has set itself high standards over the years and this *Messiah* is up there with the best.

A masterstroke is the augmentation of numbers with the 23 voices of the Huntley School Chapel Choir joining the soprano and alto sections of the chorus. The tenor and bass sections were not overshadowed and maintained their balance admirably.

The audience was entranced by popular *All We Like Sheep Have Gone Astray* and, as tradition dictates, rose to their feet for the *Halleluiah* chorus.

A lasting memory of this consummate evening of sacred music is the image of a 12-year-old's enraptured face, glowingly involved in the music he was helping create. Long-forgotten memories of a bygone boy soprano.

We are indeed blessed to have devotion and talent of this stature to grace our Regent stage. Rapturous applause ensured an encore, and the *Halleluiah* chorus guaranteed a deserved standing ovation.

5/12/09