

Pressestimmen zum Konzert des Gemischten Chores Zürich vom 2. und 3. April 2015 in der Tonhalle Zürich

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Gemütlicher Messias

Der Gemischte Chor Zürich singt Händel

Georg Friedrich Händels berühmtes Oratorium «Messiah» kam etwas brav daher im traditionellen Osterkonzert des Gemischten Chors Zürich. Dabei würden die dem Werk zugrunde liegenden Bibeltexte wie auch die Musik reichlich Gelegenheit bieten für eine explizitere Darstellung.

Guter Chor

Der Chor zeigte eine sehr solide Leistung unter der Führung seines langjährigen Leiters Joachim Krause und gemeinsam mit einer kleinen Besetzung des Tonhalle-Orchesters Zürich. Schon die «Sinfony» gestaltete Krause allerdings sehr kleinteilig, wodurch die Musik zwar deutlich artikuliert erklang, aber nicht richtig in Fahrt kommen wollte. Er setzte auf die Schlichtheit, welche «Messiah» an vielen Stellen ja durchaus prägt, vieles geriet indes zu distanziert. Die dynamischen Möglichkeiten hätten noch mehr ausgeschöpft werden können, wie auch einige dramatische Effekte Händels, etwa die auffahrenden Punktierungen in "*Thus Saith The Lord*" oder die unheimliche Stimmung in "*The People That Walked in Darkness*". Dafür hielt Krause die an die 100 Stimmen des Chors, das Orchester und die Solisten gekonnt und in sehr guter klanglicher Balance zusammen. Bemerkenswert für einen Laienchor waren dessen Disziplin, seine rhythmische Präzision und die Verlässlichkeit in den Einsätzen, insbesondere in den vielen Fugati. Auch die Sonorität und die Kraft der äusseren Register liessen aufhorchen, in den Mittelstimmen hingegen fehlte es etwas an Substanz.

Zone der Beschaulichkeit

Die vier Solisten spielten ihre sängerische Souveränität und die Schönheit ihrer Stimmen aus, jedoch vermittelten auch sie die Dringlichkeit der Texte und deren emotionalen Gehalt nur bedingt. Ivana Rusko berührte mehr mit ihrem glockenhellen Sopran und feinen Verzierungen, Benjamin Glaubitz (Tenor) und Georg Gädker (Bariton) mit ihren körperhaften Stimmen und virtuoson Koloraturen. Viel Temperament und Ausdruckswillen brachte vor allem die Mezzosopranistin Marie-Claude Chappuis ins Spiel. Sie ging in ihren Arien Risiken ein, verliess die gepflegte Komfortzone der Beschaulichkeit und sang in fesselnder Weise von den Demütigungs-Szenen der Passion Christi.

Was der Gemischte Chor Zürich und Joachim Krause an Feuer und an Inspiration noch alles zu bieten hätten, das zeigten sie im Gassenhauer dieses Oratoriums, im «Hallelujah». Der Dirigent baute dort überraschende Echoeffekte ein, liess die Jubelmotive in den verschiedenen Stimmen aufblitzen und den ambitionierten Chor mit voller Energie und Verve singen.

Zürich Tonhalle, Gründonnerstag, 2. April

Every Valley Shall Be Exalted

Handel's *Messiah* at the Tonhalle

There had, in fact, been such a crush at the ticket queue that the cache of concert programs wasn't sufficient to go around. Whether one had the scriptural texts by Charles Jennens (1741) in hand or not, the Gemischte Chor Zürich under Artistic Director Joachim Krause showed the great work as worth its weight in gold. Accompanied by some twenty chamber musicians from the Tonhalle's orchestra, the accomplished amateur choir took the benefit of a professional configuration.

Living in England after 1712, the German-born Handel turned increasingly away from the operas that had secured his reputation and began to focus increasingly on choral works that met the demands of popular taste. In 1740, invited to visit Ireland, he completed the three-part *Messiah* oratorio and its orchestration in a mere 24 days, performing it first in Dublin in the Spring of 1742, then in London a year later. Originally written for a more modest scale, the number of voices enlarged over the centuries, and numbered all of 80 at the Zurich performance.

The work itself falls into three major parts: firstly, the prophecies by Isaiah, and the Annunciation by the shepherds; secondly, a concentration on the Passion of Christ, which usually ends with the Hallelujah chorus – but ended farther forward here to split the concert nicely into two halves, allowing for a break; and thirdly, Christ's Resurrection and glorification in Heaven.

Musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky wrote that unlike his contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach, Handel seems to have shone in the light of public adoration. That King George II rose to his feet at the end of the Hallelujah chorus – such that the whole audience followed suit – must have tickled the composer pink. Yet, writes the scholar, there was “no ostentation in his service to God”. Keeping that in mind, showiness of any order would not be in keeping with the composer's original intention, and as such, the Zurich performance was almost spot on. The very humanness of the evening was what endeared it most; here were neighbours, parents, friends all raising their voices to “the Glory of the Lord”. Our audience, too, was thrilled with the now-familiar Hallelujah chorus; I even caught someone to my far right merrily tapping his fingers on his knee. Indeed, when Chinese tourists three seats ahead filmed the Chorus on an iPhone, people were good-spirited enough to once let the aberration pass.

Tackling *Messiah* for a lay choir is no small undertaking. Barring a somewhat passionless alto section, the choir met the task with aplomb. The singers came in solidly on cue, and were attentive to the conductor without exception. I could only wish the soprano section could enjoy a little stronger representation, asked as they are to hold up the melodies.

The evening's soloists were varied in performance skills and aptitude in English, which can be a sore point with native English speakers living in Switzerland such as myself. Baritone Georg Gädker had a superb command of his diction, putting a clear consonant at the end of each word that demanded it, and his was a commanding stage presence. When in a prophecy he sang “I have seen a great light”, the hall itself felt illuminated. Tenor Benjamin Glaubitz 's, too, was a clean if conservative performance in more of a narrator's role. Nevertheless, his talent was promising, and his English diction very good.

Mezzo Marie-Claude Chappuis's upper range was commendable, and her words were understandable, but she had difficulty marrying the higher and lower registers. I would have liked an even, homogenous sound from the top to the bottom of her range: the “passagio” from one into the other to be both smooth and seamless. While Ivana Rusko's soprano solo had mastered this skill nicely, the mezzo's voice often broke into something of a “Sprechstimme”, an entirely different sound, and one that I think of as better suited to Kurt Weill than to Handel.

As for the players, concertmaster Peter McGuire is to be commended for his tight and inspired leadership of the chamber group; as is Peter Solomon, for his superb mastery of the twin-task of harpsichord and organ, instruments crucial for tempi to choir and players alike. But a special Easter bouquet goes to Heinz Saurer for his shining trumpet solo in “Behold I tell you a mystery”. Without a doubt, a trumpet played to such perfection could indeed “raise the dead incorruptible”.