

Gemischte Chor Zürich at the Tonhalle Maag: Mendelssohn makes his mark!

Felix Mendelssohn's monumental "Paulus" oratorio, which premiered in 1836 in Düsseldorf under the composer's baton, might – in modern jargon – be called "SOME piece of work". It is marked by richly interwoven and poignant lines of both Biblical citations and orchestration. Whereas with the acoustic of Zurich's "old" Tonhalle, the sound of some 100 singers, Capriccio Barockorchester and four fine soloists might have been described as bronze at best; here in the "new" Tonhalle Maag, I would equate the acoustic with sterling silver. It was clear, finished, and polished such that the performance truly shone. Under the direction of Joachim Krause, the many moving musical parts dovetailed beautifully, and his enthusiasm for and obvious commitment to the work were clearly evident.

The "Paulus" is a long work, and its demands on the choir are legion. Yet from the first outpouring of gratitude – "Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr un Dank für seine Gnade," – the Gemischte Chor Zürich's singers neatly sealed the edges on their vocal parts. Despite the variations in tempi, volume, and dynamic, pronunciation was good, and endings were consistently tight. Even quite heavy text fragments seemed no obstacle to the seasoned vocal group, which successfully rendered varied emotive moments with aplomb, never shying from the degree of drama that made the narrative more three-dimensional.

Among the four soloists, the tenor and the alto stood out as stellar. Both gave their lines unwavering insight and color. Rarely does a text line sound as compelling as that sung by Brenden Gunnell: "Sei getreu in den Tod, so will ich dir die Krone des Lebens geben." And Charlotte Quadt's elegant chime, "Lässt uns singen" was equally sovereign. I, for one, left the hall wishing the good Felix had made her part a more substantial one. Soprano Michaela Kaune did a commendable job of the mainstay of the vocals; bass Detlef Roth seemed to maintain, in large part, the same tonality throughout his performance, and was overtaken by the orchestra's volume on several occasions.

Further, in the complex verse, "Denn siehe, Finsternis bedeck das Erdreich," the orchestra and choir fell out of sync with one another to a degree, and in "O Welch eine Tiefe des Reichtums..." right before the interval, the coordination among voices was somewhat compromised.

But those few anomalies aside, the choir's "Wie lieblich sind die Boten, die den Frieden verkündigen" was sublimely harmonious and truly inspired. What's more, in "Die Götter sind den Menschen gleich geworden," the choir's energy and conviction were downright palpable. One could almost say that verse prefigured something of an illuminated Metro-Goldwyn Mayer finish, one for which Joachim Krause might well take an Oscar.