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“ REVIEW

# A delightful festive duel between Bach and Handel, plus the best of December’s classical concerts

★★★★☆ 4/5

Under the baton of John Eliot Gardiner, his two ensembles tackled Handel's Messiah and Bach's Christmas Oratorio – with joyful results

By Ivan Hewett, CHIEF CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC  
14 December 2022 • 11:09am

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**Monteverdi Choir/English Baroque Soloists, St Martin-in-the-Fields ★★★★★**

Handel for Christmas, Bach for Easter. That’s a rule-of-thumb many go by, as Bach was so good at striking an anguished penitential note, while Handel’s Messiah is the perfect expression of joy at the

Christmas miracle.

On Tuesday night, veteran conductor John Eliot Gardiner, together with the two ensembles he founded, the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists, showed Bach could take on Handel and... well, not beat him exactly, because nothing beats the Hallelujah Chorus. But in his Christmas Oratorio, of which we heard the opening half, Bach showed he could certainly rival Handel in trumpets-and-drums glory, and in finding a whole range of emotions in the Christmas story, from awe to tenderness. And also that deeper, thoughtful note struck when the Evangelist (the singer who narrates the story) reminds us that the joyful beginning of Christ's life will soon lead to sorrow.

All this flooded our hearts and minds with unusual force, because Gardiner is so alert to the meanings of the words, and urges the performers to make them shine out in such a way that they become pure music. At one point, the performers take up the Shepherds' words "Let us See this thing which has come to pass". The scurrying of the sopranos and violins and the agile hopping of the cellos conjured a mental image of shepherds practically tripping over their own feet in their eagerness to see the Christ child. But the music itself never tripped. It was perfectly lucid, the chorus enunciating the syllables like a string of pearls, every note in the orchestra crystal clear.

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Like Handel's Messiah, Bach's oratorio contains an orchestral Pastorale in honour of those shepherds, and the English Baroque Soloists' quartet of soft-toned Baroque oboes and flutes turned this into a moment of gentle, drowsy magic. Tender reflectiveness was a note often struck in the chorales (those sturdy German hymn-tunes that punctuate the action), but some were rumbustiously cheerful. In their meditations on the story, the eight soloists drawn from the chorus showed the same virtues of musicality mingled with attention to the music's meaning. Only once did I feel Gardiner's

determination to alert us to the words slightly hampered the music's flow, and that was in the exultant opening chorus.

Apart from that, the evening was pure joy. The oratorio's second half comes on Thursday; if you're within reach of Trafalgar Square, drop everything and go. **IH**

*Hear the second half of Bach's Christmas Oratorio on Thurs Dec 15; [stmartin-in-the-fields.org](http://stmartin-in-the-fields.org)*

**City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Symphony Hall, Birmingham ★★★★★☆**



Romanian violinist Eugene Tzikeleian leads the CBSO | CREDIT: Andrew Fox

The deepest musical experiences don't always come on cue, when you're listening with a solemn demeanour to a weighty masterpiece. Sometimes they come when you least expect them, during a piece that's light and doesn't claim to plumb any depths, and is even – heaven forbid – a bit showy.

I was reminded of that fact during the CBSO's lunchtime concert yesterday, when the light and showy Violin Concerto by Carl Nielsen was sandwiched between two works which wore their serious intentions on their sleeves: Brahms's Tragic Overture and Shostakovich's bleak and terrifying Fifth Symphony. Nielsen's concerto is a rarity on concert programmes for reasons that quickly became clear: it's hugely challenging for everyone, above all the soloist, who has to negotiate not one but three cadenzas (solo spots of impressive finger-twisting difficulty). And the piece is an odd shape, cast in two movements which both take a while to find themselves, and then having finally hit on an ear-catching tune drop it like a hot potato and go scampering off in a new direction.

It can be a puzzling journey, but not on this occasion. The springy and alert accompaniment from the orchestra under conductor Alpesh Chauhan was a factor, but there's no doubt most of the magic emanated from Eugene Tzikin, the dapper Romanian violinist who is also the orchestra's leader. He has an effortlessly huge, burnished tone, as was demonstrated in the first two seconds of Nielsen's concerto when the orchestra flung a massive chord at him, which Tzikin easily trumped with a different chord. He characterised the ensuing series of feints and false starts with such pert wit, and so convincingly stage-managed the emergence of the ear-catching tune, that puzzlement was very soon transformed into charm and delight.

The rest of the programme wasn't always on such a high level. Brahms's Tragic Overture quickly imposed its gravity on us, unfolding with an iron-grey spaciousness like the sea at dawn. In Shostakovich's symphony the players responded to Chauhan's very slow tempi with heroically sustained playing, and the bleached-out slow movement left an aftertaste of infinite sadness. But the piece's overall narrative felt compromised, and the grim, agonised "heroic" ending was not as shattering as it can be. Chauhan's epic approach was surely prompted by a sincere wish to explore Shostakovich's tragic depths, but it robbed the piece of the vital energy which even the darkest music needs. **IH**

### Handel's Messiah: The Live Experience, Theatre Royal Drury Lane ★★☆☆☆



Danielle de Niese in Handel's Messiah: The Live Experience | CREDIT: Craig Fuller

At first glance this could have been a "normal" performance of the world's most popular oratorio, apart from the fact that it was taking place in the gilded splendour of a West End theatre. Packed onto the

stage was the English Chamber Orchestra, and behind them rising up in serried ranks was the London Symphony Chorus, all in black.

But as the lights came down and the urgent, darkly serious overture began, normality disappeared. A tall screen placed squarely centre stage glowed with an image of a burning sun, soon obscured by threatening black asteroids, while three dancers flitted down the aisles. Normality seemed to return when tenor Nicky Spence appeared on the narrow strip of bare stage at the front to sing the beautifully consoling aria “Comfort Ye”. But the dancers soon reappeared, followed by two actors (Martina Laird and Arthur Darvill) dressed like refugees from a militaristic dystopia. Between the musical numbers they conversed in a poetic dialogue which suggested they were mother and child, separated by a malign fate.

This dramatised version of the Messiah was the brainchild of Classical Everywhere, dedicated to creating classical “experiences, not concerts” as its founder and the evening’s conductor Gregory Batsleer puts it. Working with him on this show was a whole army of video and lighting technicians, a choreographer, and a spoken-word poet (P Burton-Morgan), all brought together by Immersive Everywhere, the team behind hit immersive theatre shows such as Peaky Blinders: The Rise.

You might think a multimedia enhancing of the Messiah would clarify the work’s religious narrative, but the creators chose to avoid the Christian specifics and instead teased out their underlying themes. The dancers acted out little scenes of struggle, oppression and joyful release, strikingly choreographed by Tom Jackson Greaves, that you could just about link to the Biblical narrative of Christ’s sacrifice and miraculous resurrection. And it became clear that Christ’s relationship to his mother was being evoked by those dystopian figures.

As for the musicians, they were driven hard by Batsleer, which was sometimes thrillingly expressive but just as often felt exaggerated, and the choral singers occasionally struggled with his fast speeds. Soprano Danielle de Niese was in very uncertain voice, but Spence, mezzo-soprano Idunnu Münch and baritone Cody Quattlebaum were stronger. Like everyone else they threw themselves with maximum commitment into this spectacle which, despite its obscurities and ragged edges, was always thought-provoking, and at times even moving. **IH**

**Sinfonia of London, Barbican ★★★★★**



Telling elegance: John Wilson conducts the Sinfonia of London at the Barbican | CREDIT: Chris Christodoulou

Some orchestras want to edify us, or challenge us, or give us a political lesson. The Sinfonia of London only wants to give us a roaring good time, and if we're edified along the way, well so much the better. That's why this one-time humble studio orchestra, which numbers the score to Alfred Hitchcock's Vertigo among its recording credits, is set fair to become Britain's favourite orchestra.

Another draw was conductor John Wilson, who relaunched the orchestra in 2018 and before that created the John Wilson Orchestra, whose annual Proms performances of musical and film scores are invariably a season highlight. He has an unfussy but telling elegance of gesture – no sweaty “conductor's ecstasy” for him – which had surprisingly huge effects, like throwing the stage light-switches in a theatre; a single flick of that forefinger, and we were flooded in aural dazzlement and colour and magic.

First up was the overture Scapino by William Walton. The title refers to the Italian stock comedy character Scapino, from whose name we get our word “escapade”. The piece capered and glittered brilliantly, though there were moments of calm when the sweetly lyrical violas suggested Scapino's escapades were turning amorous.

Then came Ravel's song cycle Shéhérazade, one of those pieces that will probably be banned soon as the text is a shamelessly “orientalist” picture of the mystic East, complete with smiling assassins, princesses with slender hands, and “pot-bellied mandarins”. But any qualms were instantly quelled by Alice Coote's fervent performance. The way she made the heart-stricken disappointment of the final song melt into sensuous languor was a lesson in how a great performance can turn copper into gold.

Nothing else made the heart melt quite like that, but there was plenty to make it expand joyously, including a performance of George Gershwin's *American in Paris* which seemed bigger and more sassy than ever – and also more musically interesting. This was partly because Wilson had laboured to restore the cuts and fix the errors imposed on the piece by an unscrupulous publisher, partly because trumpeter James Fountain gave such a sexy sway to that immortal trumpet melody.

What with all that, plus the mystery and drama of the ballet score *Le Loup* by the young Henri Dutilleux – a real rarity which sounded like a long-lost film score from the 1950s – the concert was already a triumph. We didn't really need Maurice Ravel's *Bolero*, that weird aberration of a normally wonderful composer, but it was performed with such irresistible swelling grandeur one could hardly mind.

*Hear the Sinfonia of London at Royal Concert Hall Nottingham on 4 December [trch.co.uk](http://trch.co.uk)*

**LPO/Royal Festival Hall ★★★★★**



Hugely intelligent: Robin Ticciati conducts the LPO at the Royal Festival Hall | CREDIT: London Philharmonic Orchestra

It's often said the symphonies of great 19<sup>th</sup>-century composer Anton Bruckner are “cathedrals in sound”, huge in effect and lofty in aspiration, and that creates a problem for programmers of symphony concerts. What short programme-filler can you put next to a cathedral that won't seem small and insignificant?

The LPO solved the problem brilliantly by prefacing Bruckner's Ninth and final Symphony with the *Five Mystical Songs* of Vaughan Williams, which as well as being a nod to “VW” in his 150 anniversary year also lifted us into the right contemplative frame of mind. As for Bruckner's symphony, it was performed not in the unfinished three-movement form we normally hear but as a complete four-

movement symphony, with a conjectural finale brilliantly stitched together from the composer's sketches by a team of musical scholars.

So potentially much to savour and be inspired by, but the reality didn't quite live up to expectations. The Five Mystical Songs were sung by baritone Simon Keenlyside, who makes a splendidly vengeful Italian count on the operatic stage (he recently played Count Almaviva) and was impressive in the more ecstatic moments, but completely missed the hushed rapt tenderness of "Love bade me Welcome", the emotional heart of the songs.

By comparison with VW's songs, so simple and lucid in their transcendentalism, Bruckner's symphony is all restless searching, with a Scherzo that sounds positively demonic, and a slow third movement that leads from anguish to glowing stillness. In this new version of the symphony that glowing moment was no longer the ending; the finale launched off on a whole new journey, full of sudden emotional switchbacks and disconcerting references to the earlier movements.

British conductor Robin Ticciati reminded us what a hugely intelligent musician he is by giving shape and coherence to this inspired but frequently confounding piece. Urgency mingled with sensitivity were the key moments; this was a cathedral made of malleable feelings, not massive stone. But the huge agonised melody that begins the third movement lacked the intensity one expects, and there were some moments in the first movement when the violins seemed not quite sure of Ticciati's aspiring but somewhat eccentric beat. It was hard to know whether my lingering feelings of puzzlement were due to the unfamiliarity of this new version of Bruckner's last work, or whether the performers really needed another rehearsal to pull this vast structure together and make sure all the details were in place. **IH**

*The LPO and Vladimir Jurowski perform Mahler's Ninth Symphony at the Royal Festival Hall on Dec 3.*  
*Tickets: 020 7840 4242; lpo.org.uk*

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