

Andrew Parrott Takes On the New York Collegium

By MATTHEW WESTPHAL

The English conductor inaugurates his tenure as music director with Handel's Israel in Egypt.

Handel: Israel in Egypt

Tamara Matthews (soprano)

Paul Ryder (boy soprano)

Daniel Taylor (countertenor)

Marc Molomot (tenor)

Thomas MeglIORANZA (bass)

Curtis Streetman (bass)

Members of the American Boychoir

The New York Collegium

Andrew Parrott (conductor)

Friday 1 November 2002

Church of St. Vincent Ferrer, New York City

The New York Collegium may not have all the financial resources it might want (who does?), but it does seem to have a tremendous amount of good will, from its New York audience and out-of-town observers alike. Baroque music fans have watched for years as such smaller North American cities as Boston, San Francisco and Toronto support period-instrument orchestras while New York's efforts have either limped along with negligible funding (Concert Royal) or collapsed due to poor financial planning (the ill-fated Classical Band). When the New York Collegium was founded five years ago, there was a tremendous hope that it would finally allow the city to take its place alongside the European capitals to which The Big Apple likes to compare itself.

The Collegium has had its share of difficulties in those five years, including a founding music director (Gustav Leonhardt) who was in reality little more than another guest conductor, a brush of its own with financial disaster which led to a drastic reduction in the group's activities and the precipitous departure of its founding administrator. What's more, the quality of the group's performances has varied wildly, with some concerts sounding as professional as those by any visiting European group and others where the players weren't even reliably in tune or together.

Andrew Parrott's performances with the group have consistently been among its best, and when it was announced in spring 2001 that he would be taking over the New York Collegium, hopes ran very high. Parrott inaugurated his tenure on 1 November with a sold-out performance of Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, and while there's still every reason to be hopeful for the ensemble's future, the actual performance wasn't nearly as exciting as it might have been.

Israel in Egypt can be a truly thrilling affair: Handel's choruses depicting the plagues visited upon Pharaoh's kingdom and the destruction of his army in the Red Sea are magnificent examples of musical scene-painting, and the jubilant choruses of the final part are as rousing as any of the choruses in *Messiah* or the *Coronation Anthems*. But they need to make a lot of noise, and the Collegium couldn't seem to muster quite enough.

This was probably a matter of resources. The oratorio calls for big forces (by Baroque music standards): a double chorus plus a large orchestra including flutes, oboes, bassoons, trumpets, timpani and even trombones alongside a full string section; the New York Collegium probably couldn't field enough musicians to give Handel's "big bow-wow" numbers the oomph they needed. Each chorus had only 12 adult singers, three on each part, plus four boys on each soprano line; and there were only 18 string players.

So while the playing and choral singing were accurate and spirited, the choruses rarely made the desired impact. "But the water overwhelmed their enemies" only just managed to whelm; "They loathed to drink of the river" seemed more like an interesting fugue than a description of revulsion at the Nile turning to blood; "He gave them hailstones for rain" didn't have much fire (and fire did, after all, mingle with the hail). The quieter choruses made a fine effect: the odd harmonic turns of the meterless "He sent a thick darkness" were genuinely spooky, for instance, and the lilting flutes and bucolic melodies of "But as for His people, He led them forth like sheep" were charming. That, combined with the accurate execution throughout, made a listener think that the problem was a lack of manpower rather than of inspiration.

The soloists have famously little to do in *Israel in Egypt*, but they did it well here. It wasn't quite fair to put the accomplished grown-up Tamara Matthews alongside the boy Paul Ryder for the soprano duet "The Lord is my strength," but both singers got through it with dignity intact, and Matthews did well enough in her solo "Thou didst blow." Countertenor Daniel Taylor (who had the most to do) and tenor Marc Molomot both made nice work of their arias and were truly lovely in their duet toward the end; Molomot sang his bits of Evangelist-like narration with marvelously clear diction. The most welcome surprise was when Thomas MeglIORANZA and Curtis Streetman delivered an entertaining and musical rendition of the duet "The Lord is a man of war," a piece too often used by basses as an excuse for a shouting match.

Still, when you consider what the group has been through, and their existing track record with Andrew Parrott, there's plenty of reason to look forward to the group's future. If anything, one might wonder at Parrott's judgment in selecting *Israel in Egypt* when the choral and orchestral resources at hand might have been more suited to smaller-scale Handel works: for instance, one of the *Te Deum* settings would have suited these forces very well indeed. But those pieces are hardly famous enough for a gala inaugural concert, so perhaps the choice was understandable. In any event, with that pressure off, Parrott's upcoming programs of Rameau (7 February 2003) and Biber — the modern-day premiere of the *Missa Christi resurgentis* (4 April) — look tantalizing indeed.