

Choral society excels in magical Messiah

Harmony ensures success of choirs' cathedral project

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ELEGANT tiers of burnished steel and pale wood rose in an airy tower in the chancel of Guildford Cathedral on Saturday.

When Guildford Choral Society singers filed in and up, to take their position for the evening performance of the *Messiah*, they were celebrating the culmination of a 15-month, £45,000 project involving the close co-operation of four Surrey choirs, the Foundation for Sport and the Arts and the cathedral administration.

The new choir staging, designed by Stage Systems of Loughborough to specifications suggested by engineer Stephen Jepson of the Guildford

Philharmonic Choir, was an instant success on Saturday.

Light, easily erected, safe and aesthetically pleasing, the staging importantly allows the choir to see and sing out clearly. Visibility and acoustics are enormously enhanced in comparison with the systems used in the past, and the new system has the added advantage of flexibility. The choirs are delighted.

Choral groups that regularly use the cathedral for their concerts had been under increasing pressure from the administration to sort out acceptable staging because the older systems are heavy and could cause potential damage to the fabric of the building.

Gradually, individual choirs

began looking around for a replacement, but the cost was prohibitive. Mr Jepson started designing his own ideas, and Carole Leighton from Guildford Choral Society was impressed.

On the strength of this, she asked the cathedral to invite all the choirs in the area to a meeting to discuss a joint venture. Six choirs turned up, and four stayed with it: The GCS, the Guildford Philharmonic, Surrey Festival Choir and the Epworth Choir, all completely different organisations.

They formed themselves into the Association of Surrey Choirs, pledged £2,500 each and the cathedral agreed to store and administer the new staging. "That was the most wonderful offer," said Mrs Leighton.

But the cost of the staging was so steep that even spread across four choirs, the project was totally dependent on funding from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts. This was emphasised when a trial run with a cheaper system was a failure and the choirs decided to opt for a top of the range model.

It wasn't until September 1996 that the foundation finally announced the money was ready, and after that, things moved swiftly. The system was up and running for its trial concert on Saturday and after being thoroughly tested by the four contributing choirs, will be available to other choral societies to hire.

Jane Garrett

THERE was one ingredient sadly missing from a performance of Handel's *Messiah* in Guildford Cathedral on Saturday - a top label's professional recording equipment.

For of all the *Messiahs* I have heard in recent years, this performance by Guildford Choral Society, with the period instruments of the Hanover Band and an outstanding line-up of soloists, was the one I would like to have on CD, to listen to again and again.

It stood out because it was satisfying all-round - soloists, chorus, orchestra, tone, diction, dynamics, it was absolutely all there, beautifully done under the direction of justifiably demanding conductor Hilary Davan Wetton.

The choir was on top form, especially perky as it was using for the first time the new system of high-tech staging bought for the cathedral with funding from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts.

Diction was excellent. From the West End gallery every word was clear. And the entries were so good, sure and even toned.

The singers coped with tricky fugues and exhibited impeccable discipline, enabling them to produce a wide dynamic range.

The choice of soloist was brilliant in that all four voices were of a kind; warm, expressive and sensitive to the enormous drama in Handel's writing.

Most exciting to hear was counter tenor Michael Chance, who completed the line-up of Lynne Dawson (soprano), Jamie MacDougall (tenor) and Michael George (bass-baritone).

The Hanover Band was dainty and clean toned, with a nicely refined trumpet tone. The period instruments sounded good in the cathedral, and led by Graham Cracknell the band played crisply and accompanied with sensitivity.

The performance may have disappeared into the ether, but it gave a powerful injection of proper Christmas spirit to a very large number of people.

Jane Garrett

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