

Routine 'Messiah' might be preferable

By Avigdor Zoromp
special writer

Among the many exciting musical events our area is blessed with, there is one that is regularly scheduled for this time of the year. The coming of the Messiah isn't just another legend for our audiences — it faithfully takes place every year, at least as far as Handel's version is concerned.

As is the case with such popular compositions, many performances of Handel's 'Messiah' are undistinguished — not due to any deficiencies or weaknesses, but rather to the abundance of so many good and competent performances.

One of the exceptions was the performance last Thursday at Orchestra Hall. This performance, with British conductor Christopher Hogwood, was

review

very distinguishable indeed, but not necessarily for the better.

To be sure, Maestro Hogwood is a gifted conductor, well versed in the Baroque repertoire. In this performance, he attempted to present the work with authenticity, which is undoubtedly a most desirable goal.

THUS, THERE WAS a compact orchestra with a skeletal Kenneth Jewell Choral of some 30 singers. This in itself wouldn't necessarily be inadequate, especially with the rich acoustics of Orchestra Hall. Indeed, even the most monumental Baroque composition

shouldn't sound like a Mahler symphony.

In addition, there was a systematic effort to have the strings imitate the sound of ancient instruments. All this is good and well, but other aspects of this performance didn't fare so well.

Among the essential aspects of baroque music are judicious selections of tempo and careful phrasing. The tempo in this performance was that of the Space Age.

There was the constant feeling of racing against a deadline. Traditionally, the Messiah has been envisioned as riding on a donkey. Here, he seemed to have come in a flying saucer, eager to rush off to other planets. The tempo also was extremely metronomical, with phrasing almost nonexistent.

These deficiencies were somewhat offset by the high quality of the singers.

Among the essential aspects of baroque music are judicious selections of tempo and careful phrasing. The tempo in the performance of Handel's 'Messiah' at Orchestra Hall recently was that of the Space Age.

Soprano Emma Kirby has a clear, articulated voice. In the "Rejoice" aria she mastered the 16th notes with skill, in spite of the fast tempo.

BASS-BARITONE David Thomas sang his parts with clarity. The rage in "Why do the nations furiously rage" was not obscured by excessive vibrato, as is so frequently the case. Equally

good was tenor Ian Partridge, whose voice projected undistorted strength.

Less impressive was mezzo soprano Elrian James. The aria "O Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion" was sung with excessive coarseness and raspiness. Her effort in "Thou didst not leave his soul in hell" was more successful.

The reduced Kenneth Jewell Choral was most impressive with its unified singing and impressive dynamic control. Its small size enhanced its agility. The polyphonic structure was brought forth with utmost clarity.

As far as an overall performance, goes, I find a so-called "routine" performance preferable to this one. While it is true that a standard performance is unlikely to set an earth-shaking precedent, it is far better to listen to a high quality performance, even if it is predictable, rather than to a unique performance that misses its mark.

A performance with proper tempo might last half an hour longer. But this is one of the differences between good music and factory work. Producing more units per minute in the former case isn't always more desirable.

Don't fall victim to 'tired' bottles

Necessity recently forced me out of my usual pattern of wine buying. I normally find all my wants at one of three or four stores. But all failed me as I tried to find a bottle of Pedroncelli's 1979 pinot noir, an award winner. I was forced to try new outlets in my vain quest.

However, I did find something else, something worth noting here. My journey took me to about 10 other stores over a period of many days and, while there, I naturally scanned the shelves in general.

I was astonished to see the number of tired, obviously out-of-date white and rose wines that stood there, not in one store but in several. I recall a 1976 Beaulieu grenache rose, a 1975 Burgess green Hungarian and a 1974 Mirasol Monterey riesling, a 1977 Sebastian chablis and one of their pinot noir

blends from the same year — all in one store! None of these wines are made to last that long. All should have been sold and drunk within two years of their vintage date. Indeed, all whites and rose wines (except chardonnay, late-harvest and sparkling wines) should be drunk close to their vintage dating, not some six to 10 years later.

THE PURCHASER of these wines can only be disappointed, irritated and inconvenienced. The storekeeper and the distributor who regularly polices his shelves can only be made to look bad under such circumstances.

You and I, the consumers, owe it to ourselves to be especially aware of inattention to shelf-life expiration when we purchase white and rose wines. A good rule of thumb is never to purchase the "lesser" whites (colombard, chenin blanc, dry riesling or the rhine and chablis blends) when they are more than two years old, sauvignon blanc more than three and chardonnay four.

Treat roses as you would lesser whites. Vintage-dated sparkling wines can be drunk up to 10-15 years old. They do not develop or deteriorate in the bottle.

Because of the tannic and fruit properties, the rules for red wine are more complex. We'll deal with them sometime soon.

SEBASTIANI Vineyards' recent announcement that it will discontinue its line of so-called light wines has sent repercussions throughout the trade.



wine
Richard Watson

Long considered a leader in trends, it jumped into the field early among estimates that low-calorie wines would soon account for anywhere from 10-20 percent of sales.

Such has not been the case. They have, apparently, at best been spotty.

Reports from other big-name wineries suggest Almaden is rethinking its involvement, while Beringer (Los Hermanos) and Masson plan to continue. Taylor is so confused these days it is hard to comprehend anything it reports. Who knows who will own it next.

These wines have presented some real problems to winemakers and retailers both. Their low alcohol has contributed to poor longevity. Many bottles have been returned that have prematurely "browned" (maderized). And apparently acceptance in the restaurants has been well under expectations.

In short, we may have all lived through another of life's fads.

CONSENSUS REPORTS with wine are hard to come by, but one seems to have occurred with the November release of the much-ballyhooed "Nouveau" wines. This year the Sebastiani seems the clear winner over the imports available to us. It does not win every year.

For the curious, and those who like this sort of wine, I suggest the Robert Peccola 1983 gamay beajoulais. It is not called a "nouveau" but can be considered one. The art work on the label is worth the dollar more it costs than the Sebastiani.

FROM OUR Let's-Find-Something-Good-To-Say-About-Winter Department: Champagne tastes especially good when chilled in snow, served with snow crusts dripping from the bottle. Scientific evidence supports that this is true.

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