



Graham Hygate

trained as a physicist and now works in renewable energy and energy management. He has had a lifelong love of music and plays piano and cello in various Birmingham ensembles.

Christmas came early last night in Lichfield Cathedral where Birmingham Bach Choir staged a well-attended performance of JS Bach's Christmas Oratorio. The choir sang with clear diction, with enormous energy and at times with great emotion, especially in their moving rendition of the devotional a capella chorale *Ich steh an deiner Krippe hier* (*I stand here beside your manger*).

The oratorio in full is made up of six cantatas - written to be sung on four of the feast days of Christmas and New Year 1734-35 in Leipzig, one on each day - and Musical Director Paul Spicer, celebrating 30 years with the choir, chose four of these - nos 1, 3, 5 and 6. This is a lot of material to take in on one occasion but Spicer kept the momentum of the piece going, managing the tempo changes deftly, and the length of the piece felt right.

Soloists Sofia Ticciati (Soprano), James Laing (Countertenor), Thomas Hobbs (Evangelist), Daniel Auchinloss (Tenor) and Ashley Riches (Baritone) sang engagingly throughout, Laing in particular bringing an extraordinary level of intensity to the Alto line which provides a sort of spiritual commentary on the events of the Christmas story as they unfold.

The Musical and Amicable Society, revived 20 years ago but with its origins in eighteenth century Birmingham music-making, provided a glorious harmonic and rhythmic foundation for the choir on period instruments. The principal trumpet in particular soared above the chorus at times with what seemed an effortless lightness and simplicity of tone. Leader Kate Fawcett played her solos beautifully and underpinning it all was a rock-solid bass section, and in the recitatives

the rich tone of the continuo cello, flawlessly at one with the soloists and with organist Martyn Rawles.

The informative and nicely designed programme draws a comparison between the Christmas Oratorio and Handel's Messiah, pointing out that relatively few of the numbers in the latter piece relate to the Christmas season. Perhaps performances like last night's will help bring Bach's oratorio to the fore in this country as a seasonal favourite alongside that of this contemporary.