

Solomon (St George's Cathedral Consort)

reviews

The Queen of Sheba's long-awaited Perth arrival doesn't disappoint.

Perth Concert Hall

November 4, 2017

It has taken 269 years for the Queen of Sheba to arrive in Perth. Soprano Sara Macliver ensured her entrance was suitably grand, processing with regality down the aisle of the Perth Concert Hall in a bejewelled dress while the Orchestra of St George performed Handel's sparkling Sinfonia.

Thanks to Joseph Nolan and the St George's Cathedral Consort Perth audiences were able to hear Handel's *Solomon* performed in their home town on Saturday night. The much-anticipated concert was performed in the Perth Concert Hall to accommodate the 900-strong audience which wouldn't have fitted in St George's Cathedral.

The performance was a welcome alternative to *Messiah* which is heard with great regularity in Perth and provided an opportunity to hear some of Handel's most exquisite choruses performed by one of the finest choirs in the nation.

I had high expectations and I wasn't disappointed; Nolan and his ensemble nailed it again. Two things always strike me about Nolan's conducting: his unerring rhythmic poise and the ferocity of his dramatic intent. It is the perfect combination for Handel's music. Under his direction the choir delivered Handel's complex eight-part counterpoint writing with impeccable precision and clear diction. Highlights included the harmonically crunchy cadences in *Throughout the land*, the energy in the warlike *Now a different measure try*, and the contrasting dramatic anguish of *Draw the tear*. The final chorus *Praise the Lord* was sung with terrifying intensity by a choir in full-voiced splendour.

Nolan was well partnered by concertmaster Paul Wright who led the 20-piece orchestra with a similar internal pulse and musical courage, undergirded by Stewart Smith's attentive pacing on harpsichord and chamber organ. The flute bird calls and soothing organ accompaniment in *May no rash intruder* was a pastoral delight and the bright piccolo trumpet and horns in *From the censer* generated a joyful energy.

Nolan's judicious cuts to the 200 minute work (he argued less is more and that Handel's compositional work is not as even as Bach's) scaled the work back to around two hours. The Act 1 interactions between Solomon and his Queen were much reduced which put the focus on the prayers of Solomon, Zadok and the chorus of priests. In Act Two the story of Solomon's wise judgement of two women and the infant was introduced immediately after the opening chorus and several of Solomon's arias were omitted from Act Three. The result was more compact storytelling rarely troubled by lagging moments.

Sara Macliver's Queen of Sheba was immaculately sung, with crystalline soaring phrases, sparkling ornamentation and dramatic cadenzas. She also made an ethereal appearance from a balcony in Act One as Solomon's Queen.

Solomon was sung by mezzo soprano Ileana Rinaldi who brought a sonorous, commanding presence to the King's pronouncements. Her rich tone was beautifully projected, although moments of heavy vibrato and sliding between notes detracted from an ideal Baroque style.

Tenor Paul McMahon was well-suited to the declamatory role of Zadok, confidently navigating the complex florid passagework with gleaming top notes and excellent diction.

Andrew O'Connor and Perry Joyce sang with great beauty in the roles of the Levite and Attendant, while Brianna Louwen and Kathleen How were excellent as First and Second Women. Louwen's intensely sorrowful *Can I see my infant gor'd* was a gem.

The performance was another outstanding contribution by Nolan and the Consort to WA's musical landscape. Fortunately the concert was recorded by ABC classic

FM so the rest of the nation can experience it too.

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