

Concert review, Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon, Morgunblaðið, January 15 2025

There was great excitement in Harpa on Sunday, December 29, when the Reykjavík Friends of the Arts Society (previously at Hallgrímskirkja) held its Festive Final Concert after 42 years of continuous work. The Motet Choir and the chamber choir Schola Cantorum were joined by the Reykjavík International Baroque Orchestra in the performance of four of the six cantatas that together make up the Christmas Oratorio by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750).

The Christmas Oratorio has an interesting history. It was to be performed on six days during the Christmas festival, from Christmas Day until the Epiphany, and that is how the work first came to the ears of churchgoers in Leipzig in December and January 1734 and 1735. The text is a collection of Bible verses and hymn strophes, in addition to a considerable amount of original text, probably by Bach's close colleague, Christian Friedrich Henrici. However, Bach recycled much of the music of the Christmas Oratorio from earlier works, including secular cantatas.

The performance of the Christmas Oratorio in Harpa on the third last day of the year 2024 was first-class and that goes for every aspect of the interpretation. The two choirs, that joined forces in some of the movements, sang excellently and the pronunciation of the German text was very good.

The sound of the Reykjavík International Baroque Orchestra was also extremely beautiful, although not very loud. The balance between choirs and orchestra on the one hand, and orchestra and soloists on the other hand, was splendid, thanks in no small part to the conductor, Benedikt Kristjánsson. Several instrumentalists had a great performance and I would especially like to praise the concertmaster, Tuomo Suni.

As mentioned before, every facet of this performance was first-rate, and that certainly also applies to the soloists. Jóhann Kristinsson (bass) and Herdís Anna Jónasdóttir (soprano) did very well, but perhaps Benedikt Kristjánsson (tenor, Evangelist) and Alex Potter (countertenor) stole the show. Potter sang superbly, not least the A minor aria "Bereite dich, Zion, mit zärtlichen Trieben" (cantata I). Kristjánsson's narration in the role of the Evangelist was also particularly convincing, and as well as singing a demanding solo part he also held the performance impeccably together by his conducting, which is no small feat (following in the footsteps of the German tenor and conductor Peter Schreier).

I would also like to praise the Friends of Arts Society for its impressive programme booklet which included the libretto, both in the original language and in an Icelandic translation. Halldór Hauksson's summary of the history and origin of the Christmas Oratorio was also exemplary.

The Reykjavík Friends of the Arts Society and the two choirs have been delighting Icelanders (and actually many more) for decades. Their repertoire throughout the years has not only been ambitious, but also elegantly programmed and presented. The Society will be sorely missed as a concert organizer. Many people have put their hands to the plow, but the visionary work of managing director Inga Rós Ingólfssdóttir and artistic director Hörður Áskelsson has to be especially mentioned. It was therefore quite an emotional moment when they stepped on the stage of Eldborg after the performance to a standing ovation. That was a fitting tribute and a reminder that we should thank their selfless contribution to Icelandic music life for decades.

Bravi tutti!