

'Messiah' packed Assembly Hall

FOR the second time this month, the Assembly Hall has proved too small to accommodate music lovers of Tunbridge Wells and district. When the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society gave its Handel bicentenary festival performance of "Messiah" on Sunday afternoon, all seats were sold and many were standing both in balcony and stalls.

The capacity audience was richly rewarded by a fine performance of this moving and dramatic story of the advent, birth, passion and resurrection of Christ which, because of the greatness of its concept and musical interpretation never palls with familiarity.

The chorus of about 150 voices, with orchestra led by Ronald Good, were conducted by Dr. Harold May, and soloists were Thelma Godfrey (soprano), Caroline Foster (contralto), Duncan Robertson (tenor), Richard Standen (bass) and David Mason (trumpet).

So well-trained was the choir that, although women's voices outnumbered men's by about three to one, there was no lack of balance and the chorus work throughout was really musical and well-proportioned. It is not easy for about 70 soprano voices to sing quietly in unison, but the sensitive nuances of light and shade gave the choruses their full dramatic import.

A MOVING CHORUS

This was noticeable both in the triumphant, fast-moving choruses and in those of more tragic significance. Particularly moving was the interpretation of the short but deeply emotional

"Surely He has borne our griefs," contrasting vividly with the fugal choruses such as "He trusted in God" and the exultant "Hallelujah."

Choir and conductor should be particularly congratulated for performing the "Hallelujah" chorus at a uniform speed throughout. There is nothing in the usual score to justify the incongruous *rallentando* in the phrase "The kingdoms of this world" which is heard in so many performances, and it was refreshing to hear it sung on a level with the rest of the chorus.

INSPIRING SOLOISTS

Two of the soloists, Thelma Godfrey and Richard Standen, have performed with the society before, and their interpretations of the soprano and bass recitatives and arias were both musically inspiring and technically perfect. Thelma Godfrey gave new life to "I know that my Redeemer liveth," and her execution of the more florid arias was faultless.

Duncan Robertson, who has sung at Glyndebourne and for the B.B.C., and contralto Caroline Foster, were making their first appearance with the Society. The latter had travelled from Manchester for the performance.

Although it is difficult to pick out a highlight from a whole afternoon of highlights, it is certain that one of the most thrilling parts was the near-perfect performance by Richard Standen and trumpeter David Mason of "The trumpet shall sound." Rarely can this triumphant and exciting aria have been given a finer and more satisfying performance.

If Handel himself had been at the Assembly Hall on Sunday and heard this performance of "Messiah," he would have been amply rewarded and gratified by what he heard. It was in every way a worthy tribute to his memory.

J.P.