

*Kent and Sussex Courier*

*14th May 1909*

April 30th, 1909

GREAT HALL, TUNBRIDGE WELLS  
Wednesday, May 12th at 7.45

MR. FRANCIS J. FOOTE'S CHOIR announce a performance of Handel's oratorio "The Messiah". Positively for the first time in Tunbridge Wells and district with a select and properly balanced choir and complete professional orchestra composed largely of eminent public soloists. The only authentic edition of the above work by Dr. Ebenezer Prout will be used on this occasion. Choir and orchestra of 150 performers. Artistes: Soprano, Miss Maria Ricardi. Tenor, Mr. Cynlais Gibbs. Contralto, Miss Marion Wadia. Bass, Mr. David Beazell. Mr. John Solomon, the eminent trumpet soloist, will perform the trumpet obligato. Leader, Mr. Spencer Dyke. Conductor, Francis J. Foote.

(repeated on May 7th.)

Nothing that Mr Francis J. Foote accomplishes in pursuit of his art is devoid of interest, and oratorio lovers made their way to the Great Hall on Wednesday evening, in the assurance of hearing a praiseworthy performance of Handel's masterpiece. It is not too much to say they were rewarded by an interpretation rarely achieved out of the festival towns.

The well equipped choir and orchestra of 150 performers approached their task with a fine sense of its import, and the dignity and conviction with which each phrase was delivered, made a profound impression upon the large audience, and enthused them to outbursts of admiration that could only have been most gratifying to the conductor, and to those who have been working for many weeks for the success of this concert.

Morbid moderns, who are inclined to sneer at everything not written in their own particular epoch, are for once alienated in the discussion of Handel's "Messiah;" its performances grow more frequent every year, and the "old-fashioned" flavour of the music is a positive force in favour of its continued popularity.

Who would part with a single quaint cadence, or mechanical progression? Who would lop a single one of the dizzy vocal ladders which the master raises in nearly every solo? One regards the achievement of Handel in this country as one of the most important annexations in British history. It is appalling to imagine what would have been the condition of music in England without his influence.

In selecting his soloists for the present performance, Mr Foote went to the oratorio, rather than the operatic school, which means that what was lacking in showy effect was amply made up for in the religious fervour with which the numerous solos were infused.

Miss Maria Ricardi, the soprano, is a good interpreter, as well as a singer; her voice has its weak points; they were most evident in the recitative, "And suddenly," but her facility for intelligent and thoughtful reading is undeniable, and all that fell to her share was distinguished by these qualities. Her best work was revealed in "For unto us," and in the exacting air, "Rejoice greatly."

Mr Cynlais Gibbs, a tenor we do not remember to have heard before, has a voice of natural sweetness and depth, though without any phenomenal power of magnetism; his phrasing was at all times exceptionally neat, and every word rang through the hall with telling effect. An ovation was accorded him after the solo, "Behold and See," and still greater appreciation was deservedly expressed for his fine rendering of "But thou didst not leave," and "He that dwelleth in heaven."

It is not too much to say that the gem of the evening, so far as the solos are concerned, came from Miss Maria Wadia, who was entrusted with the contralto part. Her plaintive sympathy in "He was despised" deeply stirred the audience, and her work all through was performed with so much simplicity and quiet restraint that it could not fail to win admiration.

Mr David Brazell is too well known among the leading concert bases to require much eulogy; in his case, much is expected, and much is given, but we should not call him a born exponent of Handel; he has scarcely the volume that carries weight in those massive solos like "Who may abide," and "Why do the nations." At the same time he is a mature and highly finished vocalist, and one to whom it is always a great pleasure to listen. His best effects were perhaps achieved in the recitative and aria, "For behold darkness," and "The people that walked in darkness." The latter was indeed a beautiful piece of singing.

#### THE CHOIR'S GOOD WORK.

For the choir, one can find enough but praise; and enough but praise for the conductor, who presented a perfect piece of workmanship. There was no raggedness, nothing immature; no sign of the rehearsal room, but the completed design, which is always a pleasure to contemplate. Mr Foote exploited Handel's many motives with a masterly hand; whether in the moments of exaltation, or in the deep wail of lamentation, the choruses were marked by the earnestness, authority and enthusiasm of those forces responding to his baton, and he has undoubtedly the magnetism and artistry of a great conductor. The performance was fine in its precision, and especially in its feeling for climax. "Behold the Lamb of God" was delivered with a magnificent volume of tone, as was also "Lift up your heads;" and the "Hallelujah Chorus"—sung, as usual, with the audience standing—was indeed "a hymn of praise." The unanimity of feeling with which the various passages were attacked is worthy of all praise, and the ensemble preserved throughout reflects the very highest credit upon this choral body of picked voices, of which as an entirely local society, Tunbridge Wells should be very proud. The men's choir was especially good in the choruses, "All we like sheep," and "He trusted in God," while the splendid volume of the soprano, which in local choirs so often overlaps—was felt at every point.

The orchestra, including some of London's best known instrumentalists, augmented by experienced amateurs, gave adequate support. Mr Spencer Dyke, as leader, did grand service, and among the first violins we noticed Stasch, the prodigy boy violinist, who is wise in picking up some experience in orchestral playing. Disappointment was naturally felt that the grand air, "The Trumpet shall sound" had to be omitted, in order that the large orchestra should be able to return to "Gloria in excelsis," particularly as there was so fine a soloist to perform the obligato as Mr John Solomon. The "Pastoral Symphony" we have never heard more poetically interpreted. The ovation that was accorded to Mr Francis J. Foote at the end of the evening is no mere description of the feeling of deep enjoyment his work has occasioned. Applause is but a garish means at best of expressing thanks for the inspiration of genius, but there was an atmosphere of Handel in the hall which had the old master been there in the flesh, in place of the clay bust, which stood near the conductor's desk, he must have greatly rejoiced in.