

ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF
(April 28, 1984)

JEPHTHA

BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.
Neville Marriner (conductor).

Jephtha was Handel's final oratorio. The composer was sixty five years old when he started the work; his sight was failing, indeed, he was soon to undergo three operations on his eyes; he had just suffered a severe accident in his carriage whilst travelling through Holland; he had composed his

last opera ten years earlier and, truth to tell, the bulk of his creative work was by now behind him.

On top of all this, *Jephtha* was not exactly a runaway success at the time of its first performance.

Unjustly so, really, since it is an attractive and riveting work that is fast moving and full of delightful music.

It was on this very aspect of delight — of the surface attraction of the music — that Neville Marriner concentrated. Sometimes this concern for the decorative aspect of the music, of entertaining rhythms and lively tempi without a balancing dramatic weight or contrast, led the performers astray. This could be heard, for example, during the chorus 'No more to Amon's God' during which the words 'In dismal dance around the furnace blue' were sung with an appropriate *joie de vivre*.

Nevertheless, the overall effect of the performance was one of zest, commitment and refinement.

Emma Kirkby charmed the ear and eye with a faultless performance as the ill fated Iphis. Her beguiling singing of 'Tune the soft melodious lute', with its accuracy of pitch and rhythm, and the purity of her tone, was exceeded only by her ethereal solo, 'Happy they!' in which she and violinist Desmond Bradley wove a spell of breathtaking beauty.

As the heroic lover, Paul Esswood struck a heroic pose, singing with strength and style.

Anthony Rolfe Johnson, Stephen Roberts and Alfreda Hodgson completed the quintet of grown-up soloists, but it was left to young master Aled Jones, as the boy treble Angel, to give the three of them a lesson in vocal production, purity of tone and dramatic articulation.

Violinists in the audience will have been delighted in meeting an old favourite, the fourth movement of the *Sonata Opus 1, No. 13*, in new surroundings as a full blown *Sinfonia*.

The combined BBC Welsh Chorus and the Swansea Bach Choir impressed with the tonal cohesion and rhythmic accuracy of their singing.

I should record that it was a bit of a mongrel performance simply because it is a sign of these musical times of appointment-book singing, air-flight scheduled music making and variegated music education and knowledge. This situation led to Emma Kirkby singing with fine Handelian style and even decorating her repeats, Paul Esswood running her a close second without quite the show of the decorated repeats, but the other singers neither decorating nor able to produce accurate trills. The orchestral instruments were modern (including French horns) except for a rather nice sounding, delicate, harpsichord.

To change the metaphor, the performance was, stylistically, a bit of a musical babble with the orchestra and each of the soloists using a different stylistic musical language upon which Neville Marriner could not impose a distinctive interpretation.

One of the benefits of performing this type of music on contemporaneous (i.e., ancient) instruments is that, without destroying the balances, the performers can play out and inject into the music all of the drama of which they are capable. On the other hand, one of the consequences of using modern instruments is that the players have to hold back on the full tone of their instruments. This tends to lead to a concern for the surface beauty and for the decorative nature of the music rather than for the dramatic or emotional content.

Such was the case here.

The pity of it is that what was an enchanting and enjoyable performance could have been a great one had the full dramatic and emotional content of the music been fulfilled.

But I do not want to make too much of this, since this is after all the sort of situation that is the norm on today's concert platforms and, when

all is said and done, it was, an entertaining and polished performance of some delightful and dramatic music that deserved to have the cobwebs blown away and held up to public gaze again.