

# Octavo Singers deliver memorable 'Messiah'

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By Geraldine Freedman



PHOTOGRAPHER: STACEY LAUREN-KENNEDY

Members of the Octavo Singers perform Handel's "Messiah" on Sunday at Union College's Memorial Chapel.

SCHENECTADY — The Octavo Singers, four soloists and a 21-piece orchestra all under artistic director Curtis Funk thrilled a capacity crowd Sunday afternoon at Union College's Memorial Chapel in its annual presentation of Handel's "Messiah."

It was a memorable performance for several reasons. Despite the chorus numbering at almost 115 singers, Funk had prepared them exceptionally well. Considering that this was probably the first time most of the singers had ever sung the entire work — all 52 sections — they were alert to every cue or cutoff, seemed confident in the many sections that required staggered entrances or melismatic singing, and worked as one. The sound was robust, especially in the lower voices.

Among the sections that they were superlative in were: "For unto us a Child is born" (Part I); "Behold the Lamb of God" (Part II), which was especially smooth and clean; the alto's air of "O thou that tellest" (Part I); the "Hallelujah" chorus (Part II); "The Lord gave the word" (Part II); and the finale "Worthy is the Lamb."

The orchestra was tight and supportive. Their two instrumental pieces were done with conviction and excellent pitch. Balances with the soloists were usually good. But the thing that sells this piece is the soloists.

Soprano Jennifer Lien's voice had a sunny quality and she easily glided about her top range. Her "How beautiful are the feet ..." in Part II had an especially joyous ring. Alto Ann Marie Grathwol did well and provided some interesting ornamentation in her "He shall feed His flock" in Part I. Both women had good diction of the English words.

Bass Nicholas Wiggins, who grew up in Clifton Park, had lovely dark tones and sang with feeling, especially in "Why do the nations..." in Part II. He was even more stalwart in "The trumpet shall sound" in Part III as he was helped by Cathy Sheridan's brilliantly resolute trumpet playing that almost stole the show. Although Wiggin's diction was generally good, some of his words got swallowed up.

But tenor Marty Coyle was fabulous in every air and recitative. His consistency, marvelous focus, diction and projection and his ability to push through to the ends of his phrases — even to increasing in volume and intensity — captivated and compelled. Every phrase was thrilling, and because Handel gave the tenor the most solos, the crowd got to hear him the most.

The crowd responded at intermission and at the end with happy, enthusiastic applause and many whistles. That cheery atmosphere was set before the concert began as Funk talked to the crowd with amusing anecdotes about Handel and his librettist Charles Jennens. It was also noteworthy that this was the first time for many at an Octavo concert.