

Hempstead's memorable 'Messiah'

There has in the past been no strong tradition of choral singing at Hempstead, but on Sunday last, in the little 14th century Church of St. Andrew, an enthusiastic chorus accompanied by a young, but equally enthusiastic orchestra, went a very long way towards establishing one.

This was a 'sing through' performance of the 'Messiah' in which anybody who so desired had been invited to take part, and it was a performance designed to involve as many of the younger members of the community as possible.

Some of the solos were sung by a small choir of children from the local primary school, and the orchestra, some 40 strong, was largely drawn from local schools.

When they gathered during the afternoon for a short rehearsal, it was the first time that they had ever all come together, and for many of them this was to be their first ever performance of any choral work. Many of them had never previously even seen their conductor.

Who would have believed it possible that such a gathering could in a short space of time be welded into an integrated and effective musical force?

Raymond Slee, head of the music department at Hockerill College, is already well known as a conductor and a keyboard soloist. On Sunday at Hempstead he demonstrated that he also possesses the rare gift of being able to lift performers to heights well beyond their normal capabilities. In a very short time the orchestra was playing with a verve and confidence that totally belied the average age of the musicians.

The children sang beautifully, as indeed did all the soloists; while the good humour, the enthusiasm and the total commitment that he engendered in all who were taking part, resulted in the performance being touched at times with that indefinable 'magic' that is so often missing from a more professional performance.

I have in the past experienced much more polished performances of Handel's 'Messiah,' but never one that I have found more moving or more memorable. This was indeed a 'happening' which none of the two hundred people involved will ever be likely to forget.

This performance brought to an end the Festival Weekend in the village which had included an exhibition in the village hall, a foot-path rally, in which twenty one of the parish paths were walked, the start of a tree survey and a showing of the Civic Trust film 'A Future for the Past.' It proved a very fitting climax to a busy, but thoroughly enjoyable week ends activities.

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