

**Cleveland Orchestra & Chorus:  
*Messiah* with Jane Glover (Dec. 6)**

by Nicholas Stevens



As *ClevelandClassical* reported [last week](#), the performances of Handel's *Messiah* that Jane Glover led with the Cleveland Orchestra this past weekend marked her hundredth through hundred-and-third times conducting the oratorio.

The world can only have a

handful of definitive *Messiah* masters at any given time, and in our moment, she certainly belongs among them. As the Orchestra's performance under Glover on Thursday, December 6 demonstrated, status as an expert confers a certain privilege: that of taking risks with a perennial favorite.

Having performed *Messiah* in dozens of configurations over the decades, Glover chose to give Severance Hall audiences the gifts of leanness and clarity. The reduced Orchestra, with its 23 string players, 5 winds, harpsichord, organ, and timpani, looked small onstage, as did the 51-member Chamber Chorus. The contingent sometimes sounded small as well, prompting fears of a mismatch between hall and ensemble. However, this was all part of a plan that became clear in the end, when the famous concluding "Amen" passage filled the auditorium like a sudden infusion of warm frankincense-and-myrrh-scented air.

The *Overture* snapped into focus like a grim winter landscape seen through a lens. The oboes and violins blended to create a rich, compact hybrid sound. Paul Appleby, glowing yet restrained in the unique manner of the classic English tenor, initiated the performance's flirtation with silence through anticipation-building pauses. Tight violin trills paved the way for the air "Every valley shall be exalted," in which a tricky run found Appleby assuming a heartier tone.

A later pair of movements, in which God promises to shake the earth and the Messiah is compared to a cleansing fire, introduced listeners to one side of bass-baritone Henry Waddington. He sang these ominous passages in the mode of a thundering operatic villain, but came across as heroic minutes later in movements about the bringing of light to lands in the shadow of death — his other side on full display. The highlight of Part 1 arrived when Glover led the Orchestra into the *Pifa*. Light as angels' feathers, the Orchestra started out softly yet somehow dropped their volume even further from there, dancing on the fine line between present and absent sound.



*An earlier performance of Messiah with Franz Welser-Most  
(Photo: Roger Mastroianni)*

Mezzo-soprano Tamara Mumford owned the beginning of Part 2 with the air “He was despised.” She remained strong across her whole range, singing with an operatic tone and vibrato that brought spiritual severity and emotional weight to the Passion story. Some passages carried the sort of utter desolation that appears in Schubert’s glumest songs. Glover then effected a 180-degree turn with a shocking outcry from the chorus. The rest of this center panel in Handel’s musical altarpiece gradually built toward an iconic moment of celebration. When the “Hallelujah” chorus arrived, it did so both as a peak and as a preview of glories still to come.

With clear tone and effortless navigation of some fearsome lines, Lauren Snouffer — also a renowned interpreter of daunting modern opera roles — had brightened Part 1 with her angelic pronouncements. To inaugurate Glover’s trimmed-down Part 3, the soprano offered a lovely rendition of the air “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” Principal trumpet Michael Sachs wove a pristine and stirring solo around Waddington’s “The trumpet shall sound.” In the “Amen” that follows the final choral number, the group sounded like a full ensemble, conveying the power of this grand narrative in imposing swells of sound.

Sachs and Waddington earned full-throated cheers during ovations. Joela Jones and Alicja Basinska, who remained appropriately subtle on harpsichord and organ respectively, more than earned their special acknowledgement.

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