

Monmouth Choral Society
St Mary's Priory Church, Monmouth

Two Gwent performances of J.S.Bach's Christmas Oratorio in seven days represent the sort of largesse associated with the festive season.

This one, by the ambitious Monmouth choir, was markedly different from that performed seven days earlier by Cwmbran Baroque Singers.

It took a bigger slice of the six-cantata work (the first two and the last two), it was sung in German, its soloists were all professional and it presented for the first time in public a newly-created baroque orchestra.

Moreover, there were extraordinary but gratifying scenes at the door as efforts were made to accommodate those punters who turned up to find all tickets sold.

Singing in a foreign language is not something the Monmouth choristers shun without good reason, nor are they less than emboldened to make full use of their comparatively substantial numbers.

There were one or two moments of disengagement in the more complex of the mighty choruses but these were short-lived and were compensated for by conductor Huw Williams's instinctive grasp of the work's direction, something present in the narratives but theoretically subverted by its piece-meal construction.

The solo contributions from Lucy Bowen, Catherine Hopper, Stephen Jeffes and Jonathan Arnold were joyously dramatic, especially when accompanied by members of the Bristol Ensemble Baroque Band in authentic mode. The marriage of airs and recitatives was consummate.

The band fudged one entry but its frequent tuning - a Baroque necessity - was as much part of the church experience as its workmanlike accompaniment and the choir's formidable presence, ever in wait to launch those chorales like an incoming tide.

Nigel Jarrett