The Tacoma Symphony Chorus, shown here at First Presbyterian Church. sang "The Messiah" at St. Charles Borromeo, Tacoma, last Friday.

COURTESY

Despite selling 500 seats to an extra performance of "The Messiah" in Gig Harbor last Thursday night, the Tacoma Symphony still filled St. Charles Borromeo in Tacoma on the Friday – a testament both to Handel's beloved oratorio and to some curiosity as to how incoming music director Sarah Ioannides would treat it. Both fulfilled expectations in a thoroughly enjoyable performance that was brisk in pace and crisp in tone, with soloists that, despite their mismatch, shone musically.

From the start Ioannides made her intentions clear: forward-moving tempi that didn't let anyone (upper strings with years of "Messiah"s behind them, a chorus wrestling with fast notes) lag behind. With polite but firm control she pulled in her forces, tempering a sometimes-speedy harpsichord and insisting on a beat that carried a pulsing energy from the overture onwards. She also asked for a light, crisp, period-style tone from the TSO, with gracefully decaying phrases and plenty of space between notes, which helped balance the not-so-loud chorus and helped drive things forward. Sweet violins were supported by a lovely fat-toned continuo section (especially the bass-bassoon combination), with occasional pedal notes kicking in from the organ.

Unlike last year, there were no fancy stagings, but all four soloists conquered the variable St. Charles acoustics by addressing all sides of the 220-degree audience during their solos, spreading their sound without looking jerky. Tenor Eric Neuville brought an operatic drama to a beautiful, choir-like purity for his narration and arias (like a toe-tilting "Thou shalt break them"), his rich upper register occasionally soaring into a breathtaking countertenor. Bass Jonathan Silvia sang with effortless projection and round tone, but with all the emotion of a BBC newscaster – rather odd, when telling about the end of the world ("Why do the nations?") and raising of the dead ("The trumpet shall sound"). Mezzo Melissa Plagemann, with burnished voice and edgy low notes, worked hard to overcome Handel's low writing with excellent diction and real tenderness ("He was despised"). But it was

soprano Christina Kowalski-Holien who brought you to the edge of your seat with a hair-raising tempo in "Rejoice greatly," whipping through her 16th-note passages like a coloratura racehorse, and shimmering her vibrato ("And suddenly…") like an excited angel.

All fine soloists, yet the mismatch in tone quality and delivery made for a rather choppy aural landscape. Countering this was the chorus, this year flush with strong altos, smooth basses and sopranos with pure yet undistracting high notes. A few more tenors would help the balance.

Add in some smart musical decisions from Ioannides – three-four tempi dotted French-style and played like lilting minuets rather than dragging arias; a Pastorale with no repeats (hence filling its role of brief musical interlude); a chiaroscuro in choruses between snappy consonants and haunted, English-toned legato; and a "Hallelujah" chorus filled with stage subtleties rather than audience sing-along – plus some fine trumpet obligato lines, and you have a Tacoma "Messiah" that sets a new standard.

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