



John Eliot Gardiner at St Martin-in-the-Fields
STAGECAST

FIRST NIGHT | CLASSICAL

Christmas Oratorio review — John Eliot Gardiner leads a festive triumph

St Martin-in-the-Fields, WC2

Geoff Brown

Wednesday December 14 2022, 12.30pm, The Times

★★★★★

Of all the musical structures lasting 3,645 bars, the six interlocked cantatas comprising Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* must surely be one of the most joyful. Trumpets, drums and an exulting chorus start us off. Everybody except King Herod adores baby Jesus, snug in the manger. Woodwinds chortle. Trumpets and drums return at the end, prompting new glory. The world has its saviour and redeemer.



opening chorus, *Jauchzet, frohlocket*: Gardiner's crisp, turbocharged rhythms; and the blaze of the Monteverdi Choir, singing out with heart and soul, addressing the audience directly.

The tenor Nick Pritchard as the Evangelist took the same approach in his recitatives, clutching a red score that he never opened. How could we not listen with bated breath as Bach's Christmas narrative, mostly derived from St Luke's Gospel, unfolded? Individual soloists, vocal and instrumental, brought their own pleasures, making fidgeting impossible even when repeated sections stretched out some arias towards nine minutes. Those featuring the fast-rising countertenor Hugh Cutting were especially expressive. Meanwhile, the pleasures of Jonathan Hanley's tenor urging shepherds to pay Jesus a visit were easily matched by the delights of Rachel Beckett's solo flute and the rippling plucked notes from Kinga Gaborjani's cello. Elsewhere, Kati Debretzeni's darkly soulful violin proved the perfect frame for the third cantata's moving aria, *Schliesse, mein Herze*.

In every respect, though, this was a group triumph, with all participants following Gardiner's judicious lead, always balancing jubilant force with hushed awe in a work remarkable for Bach's skill in repurposing previous secular material. A triumph for the venue too: the radiators in St Martin-in-the-Fields might not have been blazing, but it's hard to see how the intimate power of this performance could have been matched by the troupe's two previous appearances in the splendour of La Scala, Milan, and Versailles' Chapelle Royale.

Continues on December 15, and streamed on stage-plus.com

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