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ANTHONY TOMMASINI | MUSIC REVIEW

'Messiah' Unfurls Its Glory Into the Vaults of a Church

WHEN PERFORMING ARTS institutions reopened in New York this fall, there were serious fears that audiences would stay away. But while ticket sales for classical music and opera have reportedly been soft elsewhere in the country, most of the events I've attended here in the city have had sizable audiences.

So it was on Tuesday, when the New York Philharmonic — joined by Apollo's Singers, the chorus of the early-music ensemble Apollo's Fire, and four superb vocal soloists, all led by Jeannette Sorrell — gave a splendid performance of Handel's "Messiah" at Riverside Church.

Before the concert, ticket holders waited patiently in a line that circled the block to enter the church, after going through a vaccination check and temperature reading. With seating for about 1,430 inside, the performance was sold out. (There are limited tickets through Saturday.)

"Messiah" is so familiar that it's difficult

for a performance to stand out. But this one did — not because Sorrell brought any striking interpretive approach to the score but because she guided a lithe, glowing and elegant performance from the fine soloists, stirring chorus and orchestra.

This was the Philharmonic debut of Sorrell, who founded Apollo's Fire, based in Cleveland, 30 years ago. Starting with the Sinfonia, the players brought qualities associated with early music to bear: focused sound (with just a touch of vibrato), supple flow and clear articulation.

Though there was wonderful vitality in the performance, Sorrell tapped into the melancholic underside of Handel's work, even during spirited choruses — sung with rich, robust sound and crisp diction by Apollo's Singers — and ardent arias. (She made some cuts to keep the evening, with an intermission, to two hours and 15 minutes.)

This "Messiah" offered as rewarding a quartet of soloists as you are likely to hear this holiday season. The appealing tenor



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Nicholas Phan set the mood for the evening in the recitative "Comfort ye, my people," performed with melting sound and beguiling sincerity, and the rousing aria "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted."

The soprano Amanda Forsythe, in her Philharmonic debut, sang with shimmering sound and tenderness. The formidable bass-baritone Kevin Deas brought chilling

The conductor Jeannette Sorrell and the countertenor John Holiday in the "Messiah" at Riverside Church.



New York Philharmonic
Through Saturday at Riverside Church,
Manhattan; nyphil.org.

fervor to "Why do the nations so furiously rage together," yet exuded palpable joy in "The trumpet shall sound" (abetted by Christopher Martin's clarion trumpet playing).

Then there was the remarkable counter-tenor John Holiday, also making his Philharmonic debut, who is having a momentous week in New York. He recently made his Metropolitan Opera debut as Orpheus's double in Matthew Aucoin's "Eurydice," a role he created when the work premiered in Los Angeles in February 2020. (Holiday will sing the final performance of the opera on Thursday, his only night off from this string of "Messiah" performances.)

His gleaming voice is natural and full-bodied, even in its top range. And there is almost a baritone cast to his singing when he dips lower. Beyond his sound, the directness and charismatic intensity of his singing were captivating. An auspicious debut.

At the end, audience members, having gone through some rigors to enter the church, were in no hurry to leave, as a hearty ovation went on.