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## Hallelujah! Maestro's 'Messiah' delights

*The Handel & Haydn Society, yesterday afternoon at Symphony Hall. Program repeats today, Friday evening and Saturday afternoon.*

By KEITH POWERS

Concert halls often offer unexpected surprises: a young singer, a piano prodigy, a crisp reading of a new composition. Yet there are also expected surprises, as the Handel & Haydn Society proved yesterday at Symphony Hall with its annual presentation of a seasonal commonplace, Handel's "Messiah."

### MUSIC REVIEW

John Finney led this reading, which was expected for its ever-accessible score and surprising for Finney's emphasis on beauty and proportion, and his avoidance of the pompous bombast that often characterizes jollied-up presentations of "Messiah." From the rousing overture to the rondo "Amen," this "Messiah" stayed within its artistic boundaries, focusing on its strengths — complex orchestration and emphasis on quality — and avoiding the obvious — excessive cheer.

Finney had every element to fit his concept: an orchestra under control,

concentrating on great sound and precision. A chorus that emphasized tone color and expressiveness. And four soloists of moderate volume but excellent technique and artistry.

First, the orchestra, led by concertmaster Daniel Stepner, filled in every subtle nook and cranny of possible musicianship with taste. Solos in "Messiah" are few, but trumpeter Jesse Levine didn't let his moment to shine ("The trumpet shall sound") pass without delivering sensitive accompaniment. And then the chorus,

which actually carries the heaviest load in this oratorio, brought it to its destination with nary a slip.

And now, finally, the soloists. None of these four voices set off car alarms in the neighborhood. But soprano Heather Buck, contralto Sonia Sasseville, tenor William Hite and bass Kevin Deas brought the agility and facile coloratura that the score demands, and that Finney seemed insistent on. Sasseville, with a dark and deep tone, seemed particularly suited to this score.