

Added freshness lifts 'Messiah'

By W. L. HOFFMANN

MUSIC

Handel's Messiah. The Llewellyn Choir with chamber orchestra and soloists conducted by Richard McIntyre. Llewellyn Hall. April 4.

LIKE all notable musical masterpieces, *Messiah* can stand a variety of performance styles. Certainly the approach to its performance has varied widely over the years, from the grandiloquent presentations with massed vocal and orchestral resources so loved during the 19th and early 20th centuries, to the baroque-style realisations of chamber proportions that have become popular during the past half century.

Last Saturday night's performance by The Llewellyn Choir steered a clear route between these two extremes, with a large choir but with the singers accompanied by a small chamber orchestra which approximated in size to that of Handel's original intentions. It worked very well with this balance between singers and orchestra bringing clarity to the vocal sound, both solo and choral.

Handel conceived this work as a "musical entertainment", though with a serious intent, and there was no ponderous religiosity about this performance. Conductor Richard McIntyre took generally brisk tempos, bringing to the music a suitable lightness in both texture and

mood. The choir responded well, with a crisp delineation of a chorus such as *Lift up your heads*, while the more jubilant mood of *Glory to God in the highest* brought suitably full-toned and warm expression.

An excellent group of four soloists added greatly to the effectiveness of the performance. Soprano Vivien Munday, contralto Maria Danielle-Sette, tenor Carl Cooper and bass Thomas Layton are all young Canberra singers, and their contributions were assured, of a fine tonal quality, and delineated with an excellent clarity which, with a light orchestral accompaniment, allowed the words to always be distinctly heard — something rather rare in *Messiah* performances.

How good it was, too, to hear these fresh young voices in these solos rather than the tired sound from the superannuated former opera singers who over past years have so often been brought to Canberra as guest soloists.

In total, this was a performance of *Messiah* that was highly enjoyable, and in which one could savour Handel's mastery of musical expression in the beauty of its solos and the majesty of its choruses.