

April 20, 2015

## A triumph of the will



At the performance of Judas Maccabaeus PHOTO: V. GANESAN

### **The Madras Musical Association and the Coimbatore Chamber Chorale's fundraising concert celebrated the spirit and the times of Handel's Judas Maccabaeus**

Muggy evenings in Chennai can be soul-sapping. But not if you had traded it, like I did, to listen to some uplifting choral music at St. Christopher's College of Education last weekend. The concert, presented by the Santosham Chest Hospital, saw 125 choristers and musicians from the Madras Musical Association Choir, the Coimbatore Chamber Chorale and a string orchestra take the stage to raise funds for Opportunity School that works with the mentally challenged. Founded in 1969 and spearheaded by 81-year-old Kasthuri Devaraj, the school reaches out to special children, mostly from the economically weaker strata of society, and teaches them life skills.

The famed three-act oratorio, *Judas Maccabaeus*, was composed in just over a month by 61-year-old George Frideric Handel in 1746. Written in the aftermath of the quelling of the Jacobite Uprising, the work was commissioned by Frederic, Prince of Wales, to celebrate the victory at Culloden of his brother, Prince William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland. But the oratorio itself, first performed at Covent Garden Theatre with the libretto by Thomas Morell, celebrates another battle victory many centuries ago — that of the Israelites against the Seleucid Greeks.

Maccabaeus, the son of a priest, led the revolt against the Seleucid Empire circa 160 BCE, at a time when the Jews were ordered to worship Zeus. Handel's music traverses this chronicle of battles, dejection and jubilation through beautiful arias, recitatives and choruses.

The concert saw two conductors wield the baton — the MMA's Augustine Paul and the CCC's Faith Ragland — with two accompanists for the string orchestra — Edwin Roy on the piano and Dhruva Seshadri on the oboe/horn (synthesizer).

The resounding overture echoed through the packed hall, setting the stage for the many recitatives by Kingslin Pon Bhaba, Anu Subbiah, S. Moses, Ebenezer Arunkumar, Fiona Faith, whose duet with Jessie Tina lingered on the edge of poetry, Shirley Sam, Aieshwarya Davis, Maxyn Kingston, Nadisha Thomas, Sharanya Gopinath and Manoj Kumar Richard. Interspersing these were some magnificent choruses ‘We come, we come in bright array’, the energetic ‘We never, never will bow...’ and the triumphant ‘See the conqu’ring hero comes...’. But it was some of the solos and duets that were incredibly passionate, especially those rendered by Sangita Santosham, Ebenezer Arunkumar and Ashish Joseph and Emmanuel Pratapsingh, whose carefully balanced voices sounded Jewish defiance. Anisha Simon’s soaring solo ‘So shall the lute and harp awake’ was complemented beautifully by the violins and Roshini Sharon Rajan and Shilvi Sharon’s pastoral verse ended a concert full of bravado and war cries with a call for peace.

The orchestra, comprising violins, violas, cello, bassoon, double bass and flutes was vibrant without being intrusive. The singing was robust in both the rousing as well as the serene sections. And the spirit of the concert was one of triumph for the performers, audience and the Opportunity School — as Handel intended it to be.