



Uneven for headline act

IN presenting Bach's rarely heard *Easter Cantata* and *Easter Oratorio*, Philip Pickett's New London Consort emphasised the dramatic, with the singers delivering their solos in character.

Violinist Penelope Spencer added to the effect, standing centre stage for her long obbligato passages, which were expressively played from memory and in dialogue with the vocalists. This made for touching moments and a sense of engagement with the audience.

However, throughout this program, and in a more popularly conceived all-Vivaldi concert two nights earlier, the ensemble's performances were variable.

The trumpets and oboes were always impressive. Christophe Mazeaud's beautiful oboe solo in the Vivaldi *Gloria* was a highlight, however in the adagio of *Easter Oratorio*, Pickett's tempo hurried Mazeaud through delicately ornate phrases that needed more space, and the result was disappointingly untidy. Similarly, Spencer's violin solos in the Bach were finely crafted but her playing, and the string playing generally, in the Vivaldi concert was pedestrian and lacked polish.

The singing was more consistent. Although all eight vocalists were pleasing to hear, tenor Andrew King made the greatest impact. His voice sparkled with energy and colour in the *Easter Cantata*. Soprano Julia Gooding's silky-smooth tone was utterly charming in Vivaldi's *Vengo a voi*, and she combined well with soprano Faye Newton.

MUSIC

New London Consort

Director: Philip Pickett

Perth Concert Hall, February 13 and 15

This pared-back ensemble of 23 musicians includes only one string player for each part and eight singers who share the choruses and solos. While this creates some appealingly transparent textures, it also causes balance problems, exacerbated at times by lacklustre playing and poor projection from the violins and viola.

Pickett is the ensemble's founder and a specialist in early-music interpretation. As a conductor he seemed more content to keep time rather than convey much expressive detail to the performers. Although the playing was often elegantly shaped, there were times when it was too contained for too long.

Even the opening chorus of *Gloria* had a restraint and a lack of intensity at odds with the musical gesture. Some of the longer Bach movements, especially when Pickett chose not to conduct, sagged in the middle and were musically rather static.

The New London Consort promotes itself as one of the world's leading early-music ensembles. If this is really the case, these uneven performances, as the Perth Festival's headline fine music act, are all the more reason to feel disappointed.

Mark Coughlan