

St Andrew's, Bedford

CONCERT REVIEW - SATURDAY 9TH MARCH 2019 ST. ALBANS CATHEDRAL CHOIR

Through the great generosity of the Cathedral Music Trust, to whom the St. Andrew's community is most grateful, we were treated to a concert of outstanding excellence in every way. Every virtue of choral singing was displayed : faultless intonation ; excellent tone, blend and balance ; crystal-clear diction (and I was sitting at the back of church) ; perfect ensemble ; admirable variety of dynamics ; intensity and fervour when needed, and tenderness and sensitivity by turns. In every piece, one felt that the choir's communication skills and firm commitment to what they were singing came across constantly.

It is a rare event for the Cathedral Choir to venture as far afield as North Bedfordshire, and it is worth pointing out that the full choir of 18 boys and 12 men sing together only at week-ends. During the week, the boys alone sing two Evensongs (Tues. and Thurs.) with the girls' choir singing on Wed. and Fri. The latter also sings with the men on some Sundays, of course. I was glad to hear that the trebles were being given the morning off on Sunday 10th; but they were still due to sing Choral Evensong that evening! The extraordinary quality of the choir is living witness not only to choir-training of a very high order but also of the devotion and loyalty of all its members. It is no easy task these days to maintain such standards, and the programme booklet made sobering reading.

During the concert, the Assistant Organist, Mr. Tom Winpenny, contributed two splendid organ solos, by composers perhaps not readily thought of as associated with the instrument - Mozart and Schumann. His playing was of exceptional distinction, with the neatest, swiftest and most even semiquavers you will ever hear, allied to an unobtrusive yet profound musicality. This latter quality was manifest in his accompaniments to the anthems by Boyce, Mendelssohn, Howells (Magnificat), and Ridout. He made it all sound and look so easy and natural, with the minimum of fuss and

extraneous movement, and it was moving to see the lay clerks and choristers in rapt attention during his solo playing.

It is all too tempting to write detailed notes on every work sung by the choir, whose programme - neither too long nor too short, and very skilfully ordered - consisted of Purcell, Byrd, Tallis, Boyce, Mendelssohn, Wood, Bairstow, Howells, Ridout and Harris - a very fair conspectus of the choir's regular repertoire. There were so many moments to savour, and so many "jewels in the crown", that I must restrict myself to just a few favourites. In the first half, the rolling Amens at the end of Byrd's "Praise our Lord" ; the elegant delights of the various "verse" sections in William Boyce's music for Job 28 (vv.12-15,18,20-21,23-28, so admirably set) ; three masterpieces by Mendelssohn, the first two sung in German (on the pronunciation of which James our Vicar was particularly complimentary!) and the celebrated "Hear my prayer" in as moving a performance as I can recall, and with a truly remarkable treble soloist, John Ellis Wallace, whose top Gs had a quality which all would envy, and whose clarity of words (and apparent total absence of stage-fright!) could not have been bettered. His vocal timbre, breath-control and general artistry were quite outstanding. The choir was at its glorious best in this anthem, too.

After the interval, there was thrilling splendour in Wood's double choir "Hail gladdening light", an almost Russian richness, mystery and magic in "Let all mortal flesh" (Bairstow), and a superbly skilled and spacious performance of another double choir classic, W. H. Harris's 1925 "Faire is the heaven", whose numerous modulations were handled with impeccable tuning (other choirs please take note!). I would perhaps have looked for a more relaxed and gentle opening to the Howells "Gloucester" Magnificat, but the two verses before the fabulous Gloria were presented with every bit as much sensuous impressionism as one could wish. The quirky yet lyrical Sacred Songs Set II by Alan Ridout (mid-1960s) made a very intriguing inclusion, to show the trebles on their own. They despatched these 6 one-page miniatures with great assurance.

The prolonged and fervent applause from the pleasingly substantial audience can have left the choir in no doubt as to how enormously appreciated their efforts were. Then came a deeply touching epilogue - I forbear to term it an encore - in the form of Peter Hurford's beautiful "Litany to the Holy Spirit". Hurford was for many years Master of the Music at St. Albans Abbey, and perhaps the greatest British player of J. S. Bach that there has ever been. He died on 3rd March in his 89th year, and the choristers sang his anthem, written 61 years ago for their predecessors, as a tribute to him. It was an unforgettable moment. Very warmest congratulations and thanks to Andrew Lucas, Tom Winpenny, and our amazing cathedral choir, for a concert which it would be hard to equal. Their combination of total professionalism and genuine emotional expression is a rare treasure indeed.

P. C. E.

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