

THURROCK CHORAL SOCIETY REVIEW: AUTUMN CONCERT 2011

SOCIETY TRIUMPHS AGAIN!

Thurrock Choral Society and its Director Crispin Lewis are to be congratulated on the excellent concert programme presented at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Grays on Saturday.

As so often with this Society there was a "first", on this occasion Hummel's Mass in D, receiving, to the best of my knowledge, its first performance in Thurrock. Composed, like the late Haydn masses, and Beethoven's Mass in C, for the name-day of a princess at the Esterhazy court in Eisenstadt, Hungary, Hummel's work was premiered there in May 1808. The title is rather misleading, since the mass actually begins in D minor.

Though generally regarded as a less distinguished composer than Haydn or Beethoven, Hummel had been a favourite pupil of Mozart, and in this mass produced a work of great power and beauty.

Like his Mass in B flat, which the Society has also recently performed, the D Major work is scored for chorus and orchestra without solo singers. This reduces the cost of mounting a performance, but also presents a serious challenge to the chorus, a challenge to which the Society's members rose with credit.

Given the relatively low numbers in the tenor and bass sections, it is extraordinary that this chorus is still able to produce such a balanced sound. If some voice parts were somewhat stretched in the fugues ending the Gloria and Credo, there was generally much to enjoy in the performance. In soft passages, such as the opening of the Kyrie, the 'Qui tollis' of the Gloria, the melodious Benedictus, and, perhaps above all, in the deeply felt opening of the Agnus Dei, the chorus produced beautifully tuned and well-focussed singing. The soprano line was strong throughout, rising to a very acceptable top A, and Hummel's great explosions of joy, such as the 'Et expecto' in the Creed, were excitingly delivered.

The singers were given excellent accompaniment by a fifteen-piece orchestra (with organ), under an unnamed leader, and, if there were occasional issues of balance with the choir, these did not detract from my enjoyment of the performance. Again, it would have been nice to have a fuller body of strings to complement the (first rate) woodwind, brass and timpani, but finances are limited in these straitened times.

The orchestra certainly earned their pay, preceding the mass with a vivid performance of Mozart's Symphony No. 41, the 'Jupiter'. Here the reduced string numbers gave a welcome feeling of chamber music to some sections of the slow movement, whilst the almost Beethovenian energy of the outer movements and the Minuet was powerfully realized under Crispin Lewis's baton. A joy to hear.

It was good to see a larger audience at this very worthwhile concert.

Richard Wade