

'THE MIXTURE AS NEVER BEFORE'

Patterns are emerging in Thurrock Choral Society concerts. The chorus is now regularly supported in concert at Thameside Primary School, Grays, by the same fine team of professional soloists, and accompanied by the London-based Bridgetower Trio, whose pianist, Elspeth Wilkes, is the Society's professional accompanist.

Another recurrent feature is the mixed programme of the annual December concert, juxtaposing seasonal music with wider repertoire. However, the mixture has never, I think, been quite as eclectic as it was this year, in a programme performed on 11th December.

The first half consisted of the famous Charpentier *Te Deum*. Familiar to a wide audience for its Prelude, used as signature music in television broadcasts of Eurovision, this work was composed during the reign of the French Sun King Louis IV, and, though not written for the court chapel, it seems to convey something of the regal grandeur of the times.

Space permits only brief comments on the performance. Inevitably, one missed the trumpets and drums in the Prelude, but so rhythmic and compelling was the Bridgetower Trio's playing that I readily forgave this omission. Graham Cooper gave a competent account of the bass solos, whilst Madeleine Ladell, of whose strong projection and pure tone I have written before, contributed memorable solo work, amongst which she burst like a ray of sunshine into "*Te ergo quaesum*". Regular contralto Kate Fun, a young singer with a remarkable lower register, was equally welcome as alto soloist, and Alex Pidgen a most accomplished solo tenor – though he did not erase memories of Christopher Killerby at the last summer concert.

Chorus work was generally more than acceptable, with some commendably articulate singing and, once again, a surprisingly well-balanced sound despite the disparity of numbers. Having to double both as an orchestral player and as keyboard continuo, Elspeth Wilkes was on her usual impressive form.

The second half opened with a very different work; Benjamin Britten's Festival Cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb*. This setting of strangely touching verse by the eccentric eighteenth century poet Christopher Smart, has long struck me as arguably the greatest of Britten's shorter choral works, and tonight's performance presented it very successfully. I felt, in fact, that the performers deserved even greater applause than they received.

Written for the choir of St. Matthew's Church, Northampton, in 1943, the cantata is scored for four-part chorus with four solo singers and organ. The Bridgetower Trio proved a strikingly effective replacement for the organ, whilst Madeleine Ladell was the ideal soprano substitute for a boy treble in the charming solo "*For I will consider my Cat Geoffrey*". Indeed, I much preferred her singing to that of any treble I have heard. Kate Fun's account of the "*mouse*" solo, no doubt intended for a male alto, was perhaps more startling, given the highly contralto quality of her voice, but it was certainly enjoyable. Alex Pidgen and Graham Cooper were again effective as, respectively, tenor and bass soloists, and Society member Charlie Innes was a welcome additional soloist. The chorus were consistently alert and responsive to the text, and gave a moving account of the powerful chorus "*For I am under the same accusation as my Saviour*", to my mind the heart of the work.

Both the Charpentier and Britten works have arguably some relevance to the Christmas season, but now it was Christmas indeed! The Society last performed *Navidad Nuestra* (Our Nativity), by the Argentinian composer Ariel Ramirez, in 2013, and it was well worth repeating. Composed in 1964 to a text in Spanish, this work relocates the Biblical Nativity Story to South America, having the three kings present the Christ Child with a poncho, honey and cakes, rather than gold, frankincense and myrrh. Full of Argentinian folk rhythms, the score is enormously compelling, and the obvious enjoyment with which it was performed was infectious. Amongst the soloists, Madeleine was splendid in "*The Nativity*" and Alex powerful in "*The Flight*". Meanwhile, the string players of the

Bridgetower Trio transformed their instruments into drums, and the Society's esteemed professional conductor Crispin Lewis even clapped some of the percussion parts!

The Trio preceded the Ramirez with four strikingly contrasted tangos, putting us into a suitably Spanish/South American mood, and then followed it with some more of their beguilingly jazzy arrangements of Christmas favourites.

As at the last December concert, the evening ended with audience carols. The disagreement between chorus and audience as to the words of the second verse of "Silent Night" was interesting, but it was good to hear again the justly admired Willcocks descants to "O come all ye faithful" and "Hark! The herald angels sing" (the latter taken at an unusually brisk pace) in the year of the great man's death.

It was pleasing to see a larger audience at this event and to welcome again Thurrock's Deputy Mayor.

A superb evening.

Richard Wade