

## THURROCK CHORAL SOCIETY REVIEW OF CHRISTMAS CONCERT 2019

BY RICHARD WADE

### CHORAL SOCIETY ON SONG AGAIN

Once again Thurrock Choral Society's Christmas Concert, given recently at Thameside Primary School in Grays, was a welcome addition to the festive season, presenting a well-chosen programme of appropriate music in a variety of styles, including audience carols.

It is usual for the mix to include one or more "classical" works, and this year we had a Baroque first half, in which the well-known Vivaldi Gloria was followed by a Corelli Violin Sonata.

Again the London-based Bridgetower Ensemble were both guest artists and accompanying "orchestra" for the evening, which was a demanding one for their pianist Elspeth Wilkes, who, being also Musical Director of the Choral Society, had to divide her time between conducting and playing, but took both roles with her customary professionalism and musical brilliance. Varia Doletskaya was again an accomplished deputy pianist, joining violinist James Widden and cellist Alison Holford for the accompaniments.

"The" Vivaldi Gloria is, in fact, the better-known of two surviving settings of this liturgical text by the Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi, creator of the much-loved *Four Seasons*. Part of the Ordinary of the Mass, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' has not infrequently been set by composers as a self-contained musical work, and it seems especially appropriate to a Christmas concert.

This particular multi-movement setting is scored for soprano and alto soloists, with the normal four-part choir and a small orchestra. It was composed possibly in 1715, and almost certainly for the then famous choir and orchestra of the *Ospedale della Pietà*, a girls' orphanage in Venice, where Vivaldi worked. This circumstance has naturally aroused much speculation as to whether some of the girls could sing tenor and bass. I have personally encountered female tenors, and a recent experiment has demonstrated that the work can be performed by an all-female ensemble.

That was not, however, an issue with Thurrock Choral Society, since, although, like other local choirs, they are currently short of men, they had on this occasion a guest professional tenor, Alexander Pidgen, and a professional bass, Howard Thompson, in addition to two "in house" basses.

How was the performance? There was some very stylish playing from the trio – though I did miss the trumpet parts in the original score. The professional solo work, provided by soprano Karlene Moreno Hayworth and mezzo soprano Lisa Coates was outstanding. They were a class act in the duet "Laudamus te", Karlene gave a beautifully lilting account of her aria "Domine Deus", with appropriate ornamentation, and Lisa a nicely lyrical delivery of her part in "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei", later unleashing unsuspected resources of power in the terrific aria "Qui sedes".

The choral contributions were effective throughout, and, if I did occasionally feel a need for some adjustment in balance, phrasing or pronunciation, that is possible nit-picking. Amongst various highlights the sopranos swelled nicely in “Et in terra pax”, “Propter magnam gloriam” took off excitingly, and the final “Cum Sancto Spiritu” (reportedly borrowed from another composer) was notably well phrased.

An enjoyable taste of Corelli brought us to the concert interval, after which the opening of the second half was a nostalgic experience, featuring, as it did, five well-selected items from the famous *Carols for Choirs* books, which were once indispensable in the Society’s Christmas concerts.

Boris Ord’s unaccompanied setting of “Adam lay ybounden” has always struck me as a miniature masterpiece, and it was good to hear it again (notwithstanding a rather startling opening chord). Vaughan Williams’s “This is the truth sent from above” was impressively blended, there were nice accounts of two John Rutter pieces and John Joubert’s “Torches” had both a suitably forthright opening and a well-contrasted, soft middle section.

Then a surprise! I had not previously encountered *Follow That Star*, a collection of nine popular Christmas songs, arranged by Peter Gritton, and published in 1989. Four of them were performed. The eight-part writing in “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” proved no problem, whilst the “dos” and “bops” in the jazzier numbers were sheer delight: Merry Christmas Music indeed!

Well done all.

I notice that the Society are launching a free *Sing Together* scheme in the Spring, for people who may be interested in trying out choral singing, and wish them every success.

Richard Wade