

'SOCIETY SPANS THE CENTURIES'

Thurrock Choral Society and their Musical Director Crispin Lewis were on terrific form for their latest concert, given recently at Thameside Primary School, Grays. Once again accompaniments, and an instrumental item, were provided by the London-based Bridgetower Trio, whose pianist, Elspeth Wilkes, is the Society's professional accompanist. There were three works in the programme.

As a composer Leonard Bernstein is probably best known for his musical *West Side Story*, but he composed quite prolifically in various genres. His *Chichester Psalms* were commissioned by the English churchman Walter Hussey, then Dean of Chichester, for the 1965 Southern Cathedrals Festival. Hussey had told the composer that "many of us would be delighted if there was a hint of 'West Side Story' in the music," and, in fact, the second movement of the *Psalms* adapts a chorus discarded from the musical. Of Jewish extraction himself, Bernstein opted to set his chosen psalms in the original Hebrew. Given potential pronunciation problems and an opening movement mainly fast and in seven time, this is not an easy score for an amateur choir, but Thurrock's chorus did it proud, communicating the sheer joy of the opening movement in crisp, articulate singing.

Most of the second movement is devoted to a setting of the famous 23rd. Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd", featuring an extended solo for boy alto, beautifully sung on this occasion by the Society's regular guest soprano Madeleine Ladell, her pure tone richly blossoming on the longer notes. Together with her fellow soloists Kate Fun, Alex Pidgen and TCS member Charlie Innes, Madeleine also contributed memorably to the short solo passages in the other two movements. The final movement, preceded by a heartfelt instrumental prelude, has a warm, consolatory quality well captured in this performance, not least in the choral balance of the concluding "chorale". Though the composer did not intend this work to be accompanied by piano trio, he did compose string parts, and, given the quality of the Bridgetower players' performance, it would be hard to object. They then ended the first half of the concert with a beguiling account of three delightful miniatures written in 1906-7 by the English composer Frank Bridge.

For the second half we were transported back in time to one of the great choral masterpieces of the eighteenth century. Like Schubert's Eighth Symphony and Dickens's final novel, the Mozart Requiem is famous for being unfinished: Mozart sadly died in December 1791 before he could complete it. He had finished only the opening Introit, though he had also left singers' parts and instrumental bass lines for a number of the remaining movements. His widow Constanze was anxious, if only for financial reasons, to have the Requiem completed and performed, and, after several false starts, finally entrusted the task of completing it to Franz Süssmayr, who had been her husband's amanuensis, and had discussed with him how he intended the Requiem to proceed. Whether or not Süssmayr had access to any additional sketches is a subject of some speculation, but it is in his version that the Mozart Requiem has subsequently been performed – though, in recent years, a number of musicians and editors have attempted to extend and/or improve it. Thurrock's performers used a new edition of Süssmayr –and very impressively they performed it.

It is possible to mention only a few of the choral highlights, which included the distinctive phrasing of the subject (or tune) of the fugal Kyrie, the highly effective dynamic contrasts, with some excellent blending, in the Dies Irae, the tremendous building of choral tone in the opening section of the Lacrimosa and the dramatic opening of the Agnus Dei. The many semiquaver runs in the score were consistently sung with a nice balance between smoothness and articulation.

Unusually, and rather puzzlingly, there was a change of soprano and tenor soloist, as well as bass, in the second half. Making, to the best of my knowledge, her debut with the Society, Camilla Jepperson contributed effectively to the performance, arguably producing her best singing in the Tuba Mirum. As on his previous visits to Grays, I was very taken with Christopher Killerby's Italianate tenor – which is not to disparage his

excellent colleague Alex Pidgen - and what a pleasure it was to hear again Kate Fun's magnificent contralto voice. Graham Cooper, the Society's regular and ever-reliable baritone soloist, completed the solo quartet. Again the Bridgetower Trio made a more than acceptable orchestra, and the famous trombone solo which opens the Tuba Mirum sounded rather good on the cello.

Sad to report, these formidable performances were delivered to a comparatively small audience. I can only say that those who missed the concert missed a treat. The Society's next concert is on 9th July. The date is already in my diary.

Richard Wade

(New members welcome see website: www.thurrockchoralsociety.org.uk)