

THURROCK CHORAL SOCIETY REVIEW: APRIL 2019

IMPRESSIVE DEBUT FOR NEW DIRECTOR

Thurrock Choral Society's 2019 Spring Concert, given recently at Thameside Primary School, Grays, was the first to be conducted by the Society's new Musical Director, Elspeth Wilkes. She did an excellent job. Elspeth has been the Society's professional accompanist for some years, but she is also pianist of the London-based Bridgetower Trio and was still required to play with them in instrumental items, so this was a busy evening for her.

As is now usual in Thurrock Choral Society concerts the Bridgetower Ensemble had a dual role as the "orchestra" for choral works, and as guest instrumentalists, and on this occasion violinist James Widden and cellist Alison Holford were joined in the choral accompaniments by pianist Varia Doletskaya.

The concert divided neatly into a French first half and an English second half, the programme opening with the well-known and much-loved Fauré Requiem, first performed, in its final, concert version, in 1900. Like most major choral works, it was composed with orchestral accompaniment – in this case more than one – but the adaptation for piano trio worked well, not least because the original score has a solo violin part in the 'Sanctus'. Only in a brief passage in the 'Offertoire' did I feel a particular need for organ, rather than piano tone.

Members of the Society, reinforced with a number of professional guest singers, gave a generally creditable performance, though, in a brief review, I can only mention a few highlights.

The opening 'Introit' featured good soprano tone at "Te decet hymnus" and a terrific climax at "Exaudi", the sopranos later contributing beautifully to the 'Sanctus'. The 'Offertoire' deployed the tenors to good effect, whilst the "Hosanna" of the 'Sanctus' was rousingly sung and the 'Agnus Dei' powerfully delivered, with good dynamic shading. The musical foretaste of heaven in the final movement was impressively characterised.

The soprano and baritone soloists were, I believe, making their Thurrock debut. Karlene Moreno-Hayworth has a rich, but well-focussed, soprano voice and gave a spellbinding account of the lovely 'Pie Jesu', whilst Thomas Isherwood's mellifluous baritone was well-suited both to the lyrical writing in the 'Offertoire' and the more dramatic demands of the 'Liberate Me'.

Continuing the French theme the Ensemble followed Fauré with an unexpected, but welcome choice: Debussy's early Piano trio, written around 1879, when the composer was seventeen years old. As James explained, this was a student composition in which Debussy was beginning to find his voice. It certainly came across in this performance as a most engaging work.

After the interval it was back across the Channel for a selection of (unaccompanied) English partsongs: Elgar's *As Torrents in Summer*, MacFarren's *Orpheus with his Lute* (the wild card in the group) and Sullivan's *The Long Day Closes*. All were well-delivered, with good intonation and expressive phrasing – though I did feel that some of the soft passages could have been softer.

For their "English spot" the Ensemble then presented a well-chosen group of three light pieces: the original version of Elgar's *Chanson de Nuit* (Night Song) for violin and piano, an arrangement by Vaughan Williams, for cello and piano, of his *Fantasia on 'Greensleeves'* (originally an entracte in the opera *Sir John in Love*) and the piano trio version of Elgar's memorable *Salut d'Amour* (Love's Greeting), composed as a wordless love-song for his wife Alice shortly before their engagement. All most enjoyable.

Thurrock Choral Society have always been willing to include in their concerts music of more modern style, and the final item tonight was the group of spirituals from Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child Of Our Time*, composed in the early years of World War II. Inspired by the fate of a young Jew who

assassinated a minor Nazi diplomat, and the horrors that ensued, this oratorio confronts the issue of man's inhumanity to man, incorporating arrangements of five Negro Spirituals as expressive of human suffering, anger and the hope of deliverance. It helps, I think, to be aware of this background in listening to them, but they work well, slightly re-arranged, as a free-standing concert item.

I can only report that I was bowled over by this performance of these moving and extraordinary pieces. The choral writing is not straightforward, but tonight's chorus rose to the challenge, whilst Karlene Moreno-Hayworth, Thomas Isherwood, and their alto and tenor colleagues, were quite superb in the complementary solo parts: arousing conclusion to a thoroughly worthwhile event.

It was good to see a larger audience than usual in the hall. One hopes that this trend will continue.

Richard Wade