

SOCIETY'S SUMMER CONCERT HITS THE MARK

Thurrock Choral Society always offer a rich variety of music, and the programme of their latest Summer Concert, given at Thameside Primary School, Grays on the 9th July, was no exception. How often would you hear a Baroque psalm setting, a nineteenth century Requiem and a jazzy contemporary score, not to mention a Haydn piano trio, in the same concert?

One secret of such eclectic programming is the continuing participation of the London-based Bridgetower Trio, whose pianist, Elspeth Wilkes, is the Society's accompanist. These talented professionals can turn their collective hands to such a wide variety of orchestral reductions, whilst delighting audiences with their "solo" spots.

Vivaldi's *Beatus Vir* RV598 sets the Latin text of the psalm "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord", today usually numbered 112, a text which has attracted a considerable number of composers, particularly since it is included in the Catholic office of Vespers. Vivaldi is known to have made three settings of it, including this piece. Those familiar with the composer's *Four Seasons* will know how adept he was at composing concertos, and this choral work interestingly uses the solo singers as if they were solo instrumentalists, with the choir as the full orchestra punctuating the solo episodes, and the whole thing underpinned with a light instrumental accompaniment.

The formidable young contralto Kate Fun, now a regular guest soloist in Thurrock, gave a beautiful account of the extended alto solos in the piece, adapting her powerful voice to a well-focussed and flexible instrument. She was joined in the score's various duets by the Society's regular guest soprano Madeleine Ladell. I have enthused before over Madeleine's pure tone and articulate singing, and they made a splendid pair, blossoming together on the longer notes and united in the dynamic contrasts. The choral parts were competently sung throughout, and, once again, conductor Crispin Lewis succeeded in obtaining a well-balanced sound despite the disparity of numbers between upper and lower voices. The soloists continued to sing with the chorus, which on this occasion was reinforced by four other guest singers, these including Christopher Killerby and Graham Cooper, both of whom appear regularly as soloists.

The longest work in the programme was Cherubini's Requiem in C minor, a setting of the Latin Requiem Mass commissioned by the French government to mark the anniversary, in 1816, of the execution of King Louis XVI. It seems also to have been intended as a requiem for the thousands of ordinary people killed during the years of the French Revolution, and as such has a universal significance. Unusually, and unlike the Requiems of, for example, Mozart, Brahms, Verdi and Fauré, it uses chorus throughout, without solo voices, and thus made considerable demands on Thurrock's singers. They coped well – but in a short review I can only mention a few highlights.

The mainly soft writing in the opening Introit, Kyrie and Gradual drew well-blended and generally accurate singing, but with Cherubini's dramatic setting of the *Dies Irae* (Day of Anger), the performance took fire, whether in the menace of the quiet opening, the tense phrasing of 'Mors stupebit' or the suitably tremendous 'Rex tremendae'.

The Requiem continued after an interval with a surprisingly upbeat *Offertorium*, in which the upper range of the sopranos was effectively exercised, this movement ending with a lengthy fugue: a real test of vocal stamina to which our chorus rose with notable success – and they could be forgiven for ignoring the instruction to repeat the whole passage after the *Hostias*! The *Pie Jesu* was given a beautifully soft opening by the sopranos, and the start of the *Agnus Dei* could scarcely have been more dramatic or awe-inspiring. Again, the performance captured well the mood of solemn contemplation in which the Requiem ends.

In complete contrast, this intriguing concert ended with two secular works.

The three movements of Haydn's Piano Trio in G, nicknamed the *Gypsy Rondo Trio* and composed in London in 1795, received a masterly performance from the Bridgetower players, violinist James Widden giving a memorable account of his extended melody in the lovely slow movement, and all concerned making the most of the infectious dance rhythms, and "gypsy" effects in the "Hungarian" finale.

The final work, Bob Chilcott's *Songs and Cries of London Town* was new to me – but what a delightful piece it is! In his former life with the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, Robert Chilcott recorded as a solo boy treble, later joining the much-admired King's Singers. He is building an increasing reputation as a composer, and, on the evidence of this score, published in 2001, I would suggest that he deserves it. Above all, the piece is such fun. The scoring is for a mixed choir accompanied by piano duet with optional percussion, an option not taken up on this occasion. However, Alison Holford, the Bridgetower Trio's excellent cellist, emerged as an equally excellent keyboardist, joining Elspeth Wilkes on the piano to superb effect. This was quite some performance! From the exhilarating, rhythmic opening provided by sopranos and altos, through the choral blend of "The flower of cities all", the expressive singing of a Wordsworth setting and the heft of "Good Morrow!", with its final shout of HEY!, it was sheer joy.

Two final comments: the printed programme, though lacking notes on the works, usefully included complete texts and translations, with an attractive cover photograph – and the audience was much smaller than it should have been. If only this valuable society could improve its publicity!

Richard Wade