

Somerset Chamber Choir Concert Review – 'Unsung Heroes' – 11th February 2018

Somerset Chamber Choir's 'Unsung Heroes' concert in the chapel of King's College, Taunton on Sunday February 11th was the first under the baton of their new conductor Richard Laing. I must admit to being a little daunted by the prospects of reviewing two works I was unfamiliar with and I suspect part of the large audience was also curious about the program that awaited them. The sub-title of the concert 'Neglected Masterpieces of Choral Music' and Richard Laing's introductory comments provided an explanation for the choice of music. These are indeed two neglected works that deserve to be heard more frequently and the conductor spoke about his desire to help address that.

Less familiar works allow the conductor and choir to interpret the music in their own imaginative way as was reflected in the approach taken for the first half of this concert. The various movements of Rheinberger's Mass for Double Choir were prefaced by short organ solos, faultlessly executed by Richard Pearce at the console of the Walker organ. This extended the work and added a sense of spaciousness, rather like hearing it in a liturgical setting. Some of the organ solos complemented the unaccompanied choral movements while others provided contrast. The pieces chosen for this performance were a perfect match

The performance began with Bach's Fugue in E flat, sometimes known as 'St Anne' due to its similarity to the hymn tune of that name. The fugue provided a noble introduction to the Mass. It was performed in a steady and articulate manner with the Walker diapasons sounding pleasantly sweet and sufficiently bright for Bach. The singers rose to their feet as the final notes of the fugue were played and some of Rheinberger's finest writing was revealed in the moments that followed. The soprano voices were warm and restrained which created a pleasing balance between the two choirs and the various sections that took it in turns to sing 'Kyrie eleison' and 'Christe eleison'. The choral writing reminded me of Duruflé, with rising and falling motifs which created waves of glorious sound.

As would be customary in a liturgical setting, the choir launched straight into the Gloria without hesitation and the tenors and basses had an opportunity to make their presence felt. They were particularly strong when they came in at 'Cum sancto spiritu' towards the end of the Gloria. The next organ solo, Anton Bruckner's Prelude in C minor began with a loud and dramatic opening chord. This could have been an awkward moment if the choir had slipped in pitch during the previous two unaccompanied movements but this wasn't the case and helped confirm this was going to be an enjoyable concert.

The lower voices introduced the Credo with a pleasing and balanced tone which was evident again just prior to 'Et incarnatus', by which point the writing had become darker and more dramatic in nature. The music picked up and became more bouncy at 'Et resurrexit', underpinned by solid singing from the tenors and basses which propelled the Credo towards a rousing 'Amen'. The Chorale Prelude in E flat which followed is one of Reger's more reflective and calmer organ works and it provided an opportunity to hear some of the softer and colourful organ stops. This was a perfect prelude for the Sanctus which began with some ethereal singing by the upper voices. Richard Laing's conducting became more animated as he took the choir into 'Dominus Deus' and they responded with a lively 'osanna in excelsis'.

A longer and more substantial organ interlude separated this movement from the Benedictus, allowing the choir to rest their voices and feet. Richard Pearce played the Adagio in A flat from one of Mendelssohn's six organ sonatas, number three in the set. The key and reflective mood of the Adagio contrasted well with the Sanctus and Benedictus, allowing us to hear more of the organ's sweet sounding flutes supported by a mellow and clean pedal 16' stop. The sopranos faced some challenging high passages in the Benedictus that followed, but these were dealt

with in a controlled manner without over-singing. I noticed a similarity in this movement with another of Rheinberger's settings and briefly felt on familiar ground.

The short Trio in E flat which preceded the final movement was by Rheinberger himself. I wondered whether the Agnus Dei might return to the luxurious harmonic territory of the opening Kyrie, and it mostly did so. There were also some quite dramatic and noticeable changes in dynamics and the choir's response to this was very effective. The basses pulled off an impressive bottom E flat at 'pacem', bringing the work to a close. This was followed by a long silence which lasted until the choir had lowered their scores at which point the appreciative audience responded with rapturous applause.

After the interval, we heard another Mass setting, this time by the 20th century Hungarian composer Zoltan Kodály. Richard Laing half-jokingly told us it was the unusual name that suggested the work might be worth exploring. On a more serious note, he spoke of his admiration for the composer whose work is still relatively unknown. The Mass is scored for choir and organ and began with the organ Introitus. The glorious opening chords quickly gave way to a quieter lyrical section before building to a loud climax again. This was a perfect introduction to the Kyrie which was introduced by the sopranos and basses. The sopranos handled the high pitched 'Christe eleison' very well and the lower voices came into their own for the final repeats of 'Kyrie eleison' by which time, the music had become more animated.

The soloist cantor sang the opening bars of the Gloria which remained lively until a more subdued mood, respectful of the text, set in at 'qui tollis peccata mundi'. Soloists had the task of delivering this section and they did so in a balanced and pleasing manner. The rest of the chorus was back onboard for the closing passages at 'Quoniam tu solus', joined by the full organ for the 'amen' which brought an exciting Gloria to an end. The Credo was next and the more 20th century style of Kodály's writing continued to be evident in this movement although somewhat calmer than the Gloria which preceded it. It was again introduced by a soloist. The tone became darker at 'crucifixus etiam' which was well executed by the choir and as expected, the mood lifted at 'Et resurrexit'. The choir and organ were at full force by the time they reached the 'amen' at the end of the movement.

A short and quite lyrical few bars on the organ introduced the Sanctus and with it, the ethereal sound of the upper voices. This was one of the highlights of the concert. They were soon to be joined by the tenors also singing in their upper range and making a good job of it. Richard Pearce added some weightier stops to the organ before the mood became calmer at 'Pleni sunt coeli'. This was short lived and the volume increased towards a very loud 'osanna in excelsis'. The choir and organ moved straight into the Benedictus during which the high tenors produced a pleasing tone as did the altos. The choir was at full force again for 'ossana' as in the Sanctus.

The men provided the Agnus Dei with a dark introduction, underpinned by some low organ pedal notes which added sonority. Various soloists contributed as this section unfolded. There were a number of loud passionate passages but both the writing and interpretation of this movement remained dignified. The sopranos had to negotiate some high notes at 'pacem' but handled this with ease. The Agnus Dei had now come to a close and was followed by some solid unison notes on the organ which introduced Ite, Missa Est. The organ continued to play a firm supporting role while the choir soared above the loud pedal notes. This brought the performance to a triumphant and exciting end which the audience responded to with a loud applause.

The program returned to Rheinberger for the final work, Abendlied. Unlike the other two neglected masterpieces, this short motet is well known and frequently performed, often by small choirs. Having sung two larger-scale masses in a concert setting, the versatile Somerset Chamber Choir achieved a good balance and tone during this final a cappella offering. The

conductor, choir and organist took several bows and the applause continued until the last members of the choir had retreated to the back of the long chapel, by which time most of the audience were probably suffering from sore hands! This first concert with Richard Laing at the helm was a resounding success.

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