

Darkness to Light Concert

This was a very interesting concert. The main work, Howard Goodall's Requiem "Eternal Light", which formed the second part of the evening, is itself a complex piece which juxtaposes Latin liturgy with English poetry, and the whole work has something of a patchwork quality, with choruses, songs and a hymn, in a whole range of styles both modern and traditional, with tinges of jazz, minimalism, modern popular music and (almost) TV themes, all within only 40 minutes.

The first part of the concert reflected this patchwork idea, with short mostly unaccompanied choral works interspersed with readings, all related to the theme "Darkness to Light" (From the works we heard, I wondered whether this could mean November through Advent to Christmas, or death followed by the resurrection of souls).

The evening opened with the choir singing Rheinberger's "Abendlied" at the rear of the church, which was in semi-darkness, an effective and unusual idea. This was followed by the chorus "In the Beginning" from Haydn's Creation, with the lights being switched on at the appropriate moment "Let there be light." The bass solo, Cor Winjnaard, sang clearly and confidently, though unsupported by any accompaniment, the intonation wavered a little.

We are so used to seeing the performers in front of us, that the concert only really seemed to begin when the choir had moved to the front of the church for the next piece, Charles Wood's "Hail Gladdening Light". For such small forces (only 40 singers) to cope with such a piece, written unaccompanied for double choir, takes dedication and demands that everyone pulls their weight. The Sheldon Singers really do seem to work together, and this enjoyable piece was performed with real confidence.

I was tempted to think that the inclusion of Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" at this point had more to do with giving the string players, who would be accompanying the Howard Goodall work, an opportunity to perform on their own, than as a real contribution to the theme of the evening. However, it was good to be able to listen to this piece performed as chamber music, rather than just hearing it as background orchestral music as we so often do. In particular, the gentler than usual tempo of the Romance gave an opportunity to refresh one's knowledge of this very familiar piece, and this contrasted with the lively almost one-in-a-bar performance of the Minuet.

This was followed by Thomas Tallis's "O Nata Lux", a brief but very beautiful hymn, but Eric Whitacre's "Lux Aurumque" stood out as the gem of the choral pieces in the first half. With its vivid word painting and contrasting sounds, this must be a rewarding piece to perform, and the choir gave everything it needed.

Bach's short motet "Lobet den Herrn", which ended the first half, seems uncharacteristic of its composer in its lack of musical variety, but this performance with its wonderfully light texture and suitably understated accompaniment on the piano, was a real joy to listen to.

There were many memorable moments in "Eternal Light". The singing of the two soprano soloists Moira Mackay and Fiona Chadwick in "Close now thine eyes", the male voices in the chorus at their best in "Lead Kindly Light", the moving setting of John McCrae's words in "In Flanders Fields", and the almost percussive choral singing in "Revelation". In "Belief", which in the wrong hands could sound like a song from a musical, Glyn Jones, with his distinctive voice and clear communication with the audience, and good support from the choir, avoided sentimentality and gave us an excellent and convincing performance. After such a big variety of sounds and styles in such a short time, the composer thankfully drew everything together in the final movement "In Paradisum" and hence provided a satisfying close to an eye-opening, or rather ear-opening, evening.