

Goodall - Eternal Light

The Healing Power of Music. Amongst the parades and poppies in this 100th anniversary year of the Armistice, communities have been coming together all over the country to mark the act of remembrance through music. St Paul's Honiton was no exception on Sunday 11 November, as the Sheldon Singers gave a performance in aid of military welfare charity The Baton. For those in the full church pews that evening, we shared a memorable and compassionate testimony to those who served, those who lost their lives, and those left behind.

Howard Goodall's composition Eternal Light was commissioned in 2008 and has received countless performances since then, making it his most popular choral composition. Sheldon Singers conductor Julie de'Ath Lancaster said it was one of her choir's favourites too, evident in their excellent and emotive delivery of the piece. The music sets a careful selection of the traditional Latin text of the Requiem with powerful poetry spanning 500 years.

While the choir delivered the core texts of the Requiem (including the astonishing, hammering insistence of the Dies Irae, day of wrath), the soloists emerged from the choir lines to deliver Goodall's profoundly moving settings of texts including In Flanders Fields and Lead Kindly Light in his understated style that is unmistakably English. Peter Stradling's baritone solo in the 5th movement Do not stand at my grave and cry. I am not there - I did not die was particularly affecting; tenor Leslie Baker's litany of simplicity and tenderness, believing that life has meaning somehow; the climax of the final movement crowned by the effortless soprano Josie Walledge amid the circling doom. And de'Ath Lancaster controlled the enthusiasm of her forces just enough to allow the soloists to soar above the background harmonies. Credit also needs to be paid to accompanist Paul Hockey who mastered the orchestral reduction.

The short concert (running at less than an hour to make way for the bell ringers joining towers across the country for a 7pm peal), also featured David Ogden's All Shall Be Well which sets 14th century text by Julian of Norwich. A worthy sentiment to close a day which calls for words of comfort and calm.

The event raised more than £350 for The Baton and you can still make a donation online at www.thebaton.co.uk
Kate Burrough

A Feast of Carols

Sheldon Singers gave their audience at St Paul's Church Honiton a real carolling feast on 22nd December. The concert showed off the versatility of the choir and also gave a rare opportunity to hear the harp played as a solo instrument.

The concert opened with the ladies group Viva singing the gentle "Lute Book Lullaby" before they joined the rest of the singers for the main work of the evening, Benjamin Britten's Ceremony of Carols – a remarkable piece of modern music set to words from medieval to Elizabethan which draw on the old carol traditions. The choruses are interspersed with solo sections which were beautifully sung by Emma Green, Alison Newell, Catherine Early and Nikki Moore. Sheldon Singers are so fortunate to be able to draw upon choir members for such individual contributions. The Ceremony of Carols is also remarkable for being accompanied throughout by only a Harp, played this evening by Katie McClaughry with great delicacy and richness. The instrumental interlude had members of the audience enraptured.

Singing such an eclectic work required real discipline from the singers, and their Director, Julie De'Ath Lancaster, guided them with a masterly hand to give of their best.

Alongside this, the choir sang John Edwards' Wassail – written as a companion-piece to Britten's work and also accompanied on the harp.

After the interval, when everyone enjoyed wine and mince pies, the performers launched into a real festival of traditional carols, with which the audience joined heartily, alternating with choral compositions from the Sheldon Singers. Throughout they were accompanied by Sean Tucker on the organ, and the varied menu of music gave him every opportunity to show off his skills as one of the South West's best-know organists.

After a beautiful rendering of "O Holy Night" by Catherine Early, who has made this carol one of her own, the whole church rang out to "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" before dispersing into the murky night, much uplifted by an evening of splendid music that really set the Christmas spirit.

The Sheldon Singers' next performance is at Sidholme, Sidmouth on 2 June.

Mike King