

Outstanding Concert

Those lucky enough to have heard The Sheldon Singers' 30th Anniversary Concert last Saturday will surely agree that it was an absolutely outstanding occasion. The centrepiece was a riveting performance of *The Armed Man: a Mass for Peace* – Sir Karl Jenkins' dramatic commentary on the savagery of war and the alternative pathway of peace. With current events across our unstable world, this intensely moving music makes a profound emotional impact, similar to Britten's *War Requiem* 50 years ago.

First performed in 2000 as part of the Millennium celebrations, and specifically for the relocation of the Armouries Museum to Leeds, *The Armed Man* calls for a full symphony orchestra, chorus and soloists, including a Muezzin to sing the Muslim Call to Prayer. For the Sheldon Concert Julie De'Ath Lancaster used a pared-down orchestra of strings, flute/piccolo, 3 trumpets, percussion and organ. This relatively small band of expert instrumentalists provided marvellous, even sensational, accompaniment to the chorus. In particular the percussion players' intense rhythmic drive in several movements produced a growing sense of menace. The hammer-blow imitation of firing guns was literally frightening, and I think the whole audience jumped at one particular moment – the first shot of war, which occurred while the men of the chorus were chanting Psalm 59 in the 4th movement. The trumpets rang out with strident fanfares, perfectly executed, and the piccolo sounded exactly like the fife of military band. Andrew Carter at the Honiton organ played with great skill and found just the right sounds for the moods of the various sections. The horrendously vivid 7th movement (*Charge!*), based on poems by Dryden and Swift, ended with the prolonged screams of the dying followed by a profound silence before the sounding of the Last Post. This heart-wrenching moment will live on in everyone's memory.

The Sheldon singers sang this demanding work with tremendous skill, excellent cohesion, always watching the conductor, and great sensitivity – especially in the closing sections where beautiful words from the Revelation are set as a quiet hymn. There was also a particularly fine moment earlier when the music of Palestrina infiltrates the *Christe* section of the *Kyrie* – here the singers seemed to blossom like an opening flower. Several members of the choir sang excellent solos. Special mention must be made of Nikki Moore who sang the moving poem by Guy Wilson (*Now the Guns have stopped*) and Catherine Early for her lovely singing of the *Kyrie*.

In the first half of the concert the choir sang Byrd's *Four Part Mass* plus and two contemporary works, *Lux Aurumque* by Eric Whitacre and *O thou that art the Light* by Gabriel Jackson. All these pieces gave a chance to hear how well the singers have been trained in soft sustained music, with very good balance and intonation. Eric Whitacre used his *Lux Aurumque* to create a virtual choir of over 2,000 voices on the Internet – the performance by the Sheldon Singers was just as good or even better! Together with three short organ solos, this fairly short first half set the mood perfectly for the great work that was to follow the interval.

How extraordinarily lucky Honiton is to have Julie De'Ath Lancaster, who has built the Sheldon Singers up over the last 30 years to their present height, now surely one of the best amateur choirs in the UK. On this occasion the serious nature of the programme showed another aspect of her inspiring musicianship as she conducted a lengthy and demanding programme with marvellous precision throughout, clearly transmitting her passion to the performers.

Richard Godfrey 19.6.16