

Spirituals, Psalms and Songbirds – Spring Concert

The Sheldon Singers returned to St Paul's Church Honiton on Saturday with a varied programme tied together with unifying motifs. The first part of the evening consisted of a selection of unaccompanied songs for the choir, on the theme of birdsong, ranging from a 15th century nonsense song (in French!), via madrigals, to the more familiar Cornish folk song which most people know as "Down in those valleys below", arranged for solo baritone – Peter Smith from the Choir - and chorus. This section also included our first jazz contribution – Paula Mitchell (mezzo soprano) sang Hoagy Carmichael's "Skylark" accompanied on the keyboard by Andrew Downton. Another highlight was Emma Green, who sang unaccompanied "The Lark in the Clear Air", a beautiful traditional Irish song. The programme provided the audience with the words of all the songs, but we didn't really need them – the Sheldon Singers' beautiful diction ensured that the lovely lyrics came across very clearly.

In October 2013, Andrew Daldorph's new composition "Five Jazz Psalms" had its first performance in Exeter Cathedral, with 100 singers and a full big band. The Sheldon Singers gave us a different presentation - three psalms, using the version for soloist, jazz quartet (in our case quintet!) and choir. I admit I approached this work rather tentatively, but was left definitely wanting more. I spoke to several members of the audience (of all ages) in the interval and all agreed that this part of the evening really rocked! The musicians contributed brilliantly, without overpowering the singers, and Paula Mitchell's beautiful and sensitive performance of "O for a Closer Walk" was very moving.

The second half of the evening began with a return to birdsong – a modern work for women's voices by a Canadian composer, which asked us to listen to the "gleaming voices" of the little birds. The gleaming voices of the Sheldon Singers turned finally to John Rutter's *Feel the Spirit*, seven spirituals arranged for mezzo soprano, choir and orchestra. The spirituals were probably familiar to most of the audience, but they sounded fresh and interesting in these settings. Paula Mitchell came into her own again with *Steal Away* and *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, and once again the band were wonderful – a lot of work for the clarinet, played by Mark Tromans, whose lovely clear sound wove in and out through the melody line, especially in *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit* and *Deep River*, with its little echo from *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. The evening finished with *O When the Saints*, an uplifting performance, with a change of mood to a very bluesy sound towards the end, just before the final two verses which required audience participation, willingly given! This was a good evening of music making - adventurous, varied and interesting. The Sheldon Singers have five more events planned for this year – do lookout for the publicity and go along – you can be assured of hearing something wonderful!

Val Moran