

**Review of English Arts Chorale concert
May 12th 2012 in St. Paul's Church, Chichester.**

The English Arts Chorale gave an engaging concert in St. Paul's Church, comprising Faure's beloved *Requiem*, coupled with less well known works. Perhaps these lesser known works deterred the audience? Those who did attend were highly appreciative, but one would expect Faure's *Requiem* to be more of a crowd puller. Certainly Herbert Howells' *Requiem*, though less familiar, is a wonderful piece that deserved a bigger audience. St. Paul's is an ideal venue for choral music, but without a capacity audience it can feel somewhat empty. The choir was also substantially lower in number, much less than the usual 70+ members, which cannot help ticket sales.

The programme, comprising both the Howells and Faure *Requiem*s, and Estonian composer Arvo Part's *Magnificat* and *Seven Magnificat Antiphons* was a highly ambitious undertaking. These works can look deceptively approachable on the page, but the close intervals and dissonances require great control and concentration.

Collectively, when the choir sing together, they make a wonderfully strong and clear toned sound. In Part's *Magnificat*, the sopranos' tuning was not always accurate, particularly during their exposed passages. A particular highlight was the fervent singing during the *Et Misericordia*. There were moments in this piece when the choir needed to be aware of softer dynamics, although it takes great control for a choir of this size to sustain a truly soft tone. Also very effective were the tenor and bass sections when they supported the excellent soprano soloist Jay Britton in the *Magnificat*.

In Part's *Seven Magnificat Antiphons*, of which six were sung at this concert, there was effectively choreographed staging which saw the choir members spaced out around the sanctuary of the church, which perfectly encapsulated the text "*Thou encirclest the world from one end to the other*" In *O Emmanuel*, there was, again, very powerful singing of big sustained chords where the sopranos were singing high and for a long time. This was done precisely and coordinated very well, with great understated conducting from director Leslie Olive. He is clearly a conductor who is able to draw the attention of his choir members with small nuances and attention to detail in these demanding works.

Herbert Howells' *Requiem* was performed comparatively tentatively. The work is a flawless gem of choral writing, with a tragic story behind it, the death of Howells' young son, Michael. Howells' son died in 1935, and the *Requiem*, although completed in 1936, was not performed (at the composer's request) until 1980, such was the suffering behind this very personal tribute. It was heartening to see three altos from within the choir used as soloists with the soprano. They blended extremely well in the movement *Psalm 23*. There was good unison singing at "*yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*" with great purpose. The highlight of this work was movement three, the first *Requiem Aeternam*. There was a wonderful warm tone, appropriate choice of tempo and exquisite soft singing. The *et lux perpetua* section was one of the most magical moments in the whole work. In the second *Requiem Aeternam*, the electronic organ doubled the bass part, which I found peculiar, because the choir's tuning had been impeccable in the unaccompanied singing. It added nothing to the performance and actually detracted from the magical atmosphere that the choir had created. In *Psalm 121*, we heard the versatile baritone voice of Michael Burke, as he undertook both the baritone and the tenor solos, with some beautifully floated top f sharps.

There is no denying that the choir appeared most comfortable with Faure's *Requiem*, the final work of the concert. This piece is a personal favourite and I felt that David Hill's arrangement for organ, violin, 'cello and harp was extremely

effective. It needs to be brought to the attention of other choral societies who cannot afford an entire orchestra. The playing of all the instrumentalists was excellent, with a great sense of unity between the ensemble and the conductor.

The opening of the *Requiem* suffered a little from some soprano tuning issues, but when the melody line reappears later in the work, this was much improved. The hardest movement in the whole piece is the *Offertorium*, a test of a good choir!

The unaccompanied interchanges between the alto and tenor at the beginning were very effective. Tuning was excellent and a good sense of togetherness was apparent.

The sublime "*Amen*" at the end of this movement felt at times to be quite hard work for the sopranos. The impression I had was that they were missing a few members and those who were present worked tirelessly. The baritone soloist was excellent in his solo passages, sensitive where necessary, but forceful in appropriate movements.

The soprano soloist gave a sweet and angelic sounding performance of *Pie Jesu*, and I enjoyed her phrasing of the end of the movement, with excellent breath control.

The sopranos sang beautifully in the *Agnus Dei*, particularly the spine tingling *Lux Aeterna*. The choir dealt with the harmonic changes towards the climax very well.

The most compelling movement was the *Libera Me*, coupling the baritone soloist and choir together in dramatic singing. In the "*tremens*" section, the choir achieved some beautiful pianissimo singing, shaped and controlled very well by their conductor.

This movement has the most changes of tempo, mood and harmony, and was well executed by everyone.

This was an exciting concert, and I was pleased that the English Arts Chorale visited St. Paul's Church to perform these challenging works. I hope that their next visit to Chichester is better attended, as they deserve a bigger audience.

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