

# Bedford choir marks 150 years

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***Roderic Dunnett hears a new work and a Mendelssohn rarity***

**BEDFORD CHORAL SOCIETY** has been celebrating its 150th anniversary, which makes it something like the seventh oldest such large choir in Britain. Founded in 1867, it was launched that April with a performance of a rare Mendelssohn gem: *Lauda Sion*, St Thomas Aquinas's Latin sequence, which Mendelssohn had set in 1846 to mark the 600th anniversary of the first feast of Corpus Christi, at the tenth-century church of St Martin's, Liège, in Belgium.

Scored for a quartet of soloists, chorus, and orchestra, it is a fine cantata, and its quality is typical of a group of little-known Mendelssohn compositions. It provided the second half of a ravishing concert in Bedford Corn Exchange by this very large and proficient choir. The programme featured a newly commissioned piece, and one recently commissioned, set against a performance of the choral version (as opposed to the version for 16 solo voices) of Vaughan Williams's 1938 *Serenade to Music*.

The Vaughan Williams merits special praise. It is a highly challenging, rapturous, and visionary outpouring, based on the scene between Lorenzo and Jessica near the close of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. It moves with an ethereal slowness, and requires impeccable tuning. That the choir managed to produce such a polished and musically expressive reading of it was a victory for them. I was tantalised by the overall sensitivity of the singing by such large forces. If this is what an anniversary produces, may there be many more.

That everything went like clockwork owed much to the assured direction of the society's music director, Ian Smith, a full-time upper-school teacher and also conductor of notable ensemble in Milton Keynes, the Danesborough Chorus. His calm conducting, and ability to oversee and, indeed, inspire both chorus and orchestra, managing to furnish leads to both at the same time, clearly played a huge part in this evening's success.

The world première was, aptly, a setting of the 150th Psalm by Tim Grant-Jones, whose five-section work *The Human Race* the Society gave the première of in 2010. This was an aptly celebratory piece, launched with mysterious side drum (both percussionists were adroit), then tambourine, jazzy clarinet, and syncopated orchestra. Some of the SATB words were kept homophonic, while the orchestra danced around them.

At "Praise Him with the trumpet" things eased off and opened up, yielding to splendid individual touches — particularly James Jarvis (three times) on solo cello, and two bassoons chuntering in the background: conjuring, it is hoped, a feeling of awe.

Later the instruments, we are told, are used for praise one by one. There is a passage for striding

brass, then a staccato-stepped section for the choir, very handsomely pulled off, some classy examples of choral imitation, and then a brief, energised recapitulation and sudden ending.

The other recent work was by Paul Edwards, a Bedford Choral Society-commissioned *Te Deum* first performed in 2005. One sensed a Vaughan Williams input here, not least a hint of the *Sea Symphony* at “Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven”. “The holy Church” marches boldly, and after “Thou art the King of glory”, he, too, makes the woodwind appear in turns: flute, clarinet, oboe, finally bassoon.

There is some effective choir treatment — passages for soprano and alto, or sequences for SAT with basses. Three repeating chords at “the sharpness of death” have an ominous ring, while the men’s-voices-led “When thou tookest upon thee” surprisingly but stylishly dancing and syncopated, featured effectively a woodblock. ‘Redeemed’ is rather touchingly set with three syllables, a nod to tradition.

Perhaps most intriguing was a switch part of the way through to a different, virtually Impressionist style. “Govern them, and lift them up”, with its paired flutes and then oboes, and its almost Delian feel, not to mention ensuing *cor anglais*, was as enchanting as it was amusing. The work coasts comfortably to a close, in a kind of recapitulation. As a whole it provided an ideal addition to this celebration.

This left “Praise Jehovah!”, an English translation (unattributed, but musically perfect) of *Lauda, Sion, Salvatorem*. Here we were treated (as in the Vaughan Williams) to four soloists, all of whom were of the top rank. It was the soprano Rebecca Bottone who had the most exposed passage, in the central section, in which the violins never overbore her, to their and the conductor’s credit, and who rose to high notes like a veritable lark ascending. The tenor, the splendid Simon Berridge, proved his mettle early on; the bass, Quentin Hayes, always a dominant figure when required, joined later and, as always, shone.

The mezzo, Jeanette Ager, seemed a little more subdued: she can, after all, make a fabulous sound. But it was where the chorus joined, or offset, the soloists in two large sections, and has its own say, slow and sombre, almost a *cortège*, in “They that in much tribulation Wait and long for his salvation”, that the stunning power of this work was unveiled. With seven brass, and again some fine underpinning by cellos and basses, this reflects the positively Bachian/Beethovenian mastery of much that Mendelssohn composed.

It was a treat to hear this rare effort, which would have made a fabulous finale —were it not that another masterpiece from that 1867 first concert, Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus”, as an unscheduled encore knocked everything else on the head.

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