

Concert Review - Bedford Choral Society

December 11th 2010 - Bedford Corn Exchange

- Haydn - 'The Storm'
- Mozart - Clarinet Concerto
- Mozart - 'Requiem'

Two of Mozart's best loved masterpieces were brought together by Bedford Choral Society under the inspiring direction of Michael Rose in their concert at Bedford Corn Exchange on Saturday evening. Written during the last year of his life, both the Clarinet Concerto and the Requiem drew on the friendship of others. The concerto was composed for the great clarinetist Anton Stadler, and the requiem was completed by Franz Süssmayr, who frequently played and sang the parts with Mozart during the last weeks of his life.

The concert opened with a short 'choral madrigal' by Haydn: 'Der Sturm'. This had all the hallmarks of Haydn's mature writing and was relished by the choir. If we think that violent storms are simply indicative of recent global warming, this fiery gem from the eighteenth century suggests otherwise. The choir projected the tumultuous evocation of 'wild winds' without concessions, but savoured the tranquillity and calm between 'thund'ring swells and horrors'.

The centrepiece of the concert was the Clarinet Concerto, performed to perfection by Ben Westlake, an outstanding woodwind finalist of the BBC Young Musician of the Year, and accompanied with great sensitivity and style by the Bedford Sinfonia. Ben approached the piece with warmth and respect. The outside movements sparkled with immaculate phrasing and tonal contrasts, whilst the slow movement captured the sublime lyricism with quiet intensity. It's amazing that we can encounter new dimensions of this well-loved piece by listening to a young performer who feels the music so sensitively. This was a performance to remember.

Joined by four soloists for the Requiem, the choir set the tone in the strongly declaimed Introitus. Mozart draws on all his dramatic instincts and for him the 'perpetual light' shines with sombre radiance. In the Kyrie, the smart tempo, fluidity of lines and dramatic counterpoint were conveyed with conviction. The choir had an excellent sense of ensemble; they threw themselves into the fugal entries and strode on with pungent crescendos in the 'Dies irae' - the 'day of wrath and anger'. Mozart reserves the 'Tuba mirum' – the trumpets will sound – for the quartet of soloists. A particularly idiomatic and sepulchral performance was given by the sonorous bass Callum Thorpe. He was matched by soprano Alexandra Kidgell who projected the top line with compelling charm. Kitty Whately provided warmth as contralto, but tenor Andrew King, was less comfortable in some of his solos than in ensemble. The first few bars of the Lachrimosa were the last that Mozart wrote and, in some ways they are the most beautiful. Thereafter, even with Süssmayr's grafting skills, the piece is never quite the same. Nevertheless, the ensemble always sang with conviction and brought the evening to a noble conclusion.

Bedford is fortunate to have such an accomplished choir. At a time when the arts are facing an uncertain future, this concert made you realise how important music is to the soul. Indeed the music of Mozart is as deeply meaningful today as it was over two hundred years ago.

John Witchell

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