**REVIEW by Chris Best**

FITKIN: Humphry Davy – The Age of Aspiration

POULENC: Gloria

RAVEL: Piano Concerto in G

Saturday 20th November 2021, Truro Cathedral

Saturday 20th November saw the long-awaited return to Truro Cathedral of the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra after a hiatus lasting over twenty months. If that were not excitement enough, this had been heralded as no ordinary Three Spires event, but a 40th anniversary special, delivering the fruits of a bold and farsighted decision to commission a world première from internationally acclaimed Cornish composer Graham Fitkin. Alongside his ‘Humphry Davy, The Age of Aspiration’ we were to be offered two major works of the 20th century: Francis Poulenc’s Gloria and Maurice Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G major.

As the programme notes pointed out, the Gloria is one of Poulenc’s late works, stylistically worlds apart from his earlier output. It was a piece new to this reviewer and a joy to discover, providing an appropriately spiritual yet light-hearted concert opener. Soprano Sarah Fox joined choir and orchestra to give us a truly inspired interpretation, with delicately controlled vibrato, excellent projection and razor-sharp diction. The orchestra supported her with solid and confident playing. The choir, if a little unsteady for the first few seconds after so many months of silence, quickly regained its form to become a coherent force. Its numbers seemed a little down on past concerts, which meant working extra hard to ride over the fuller orchestral moments, but the music had plenty of gentler passages that afforded the choir space to shine.

‘Recognised for the poetry, conviction and inner strength of her playing’ (concert programme notes), prize-winning pianist Cordelia Williams did not disappoint with her stunning performance of the Ravel, especially in the sublime slow movement that relies so much more on feeling than on virtuosity. The orchestra provided a sure-footed accompaniment, with Chris Gray keeping everyone absolutely tight to the soloist’s tempi and dynamics, the orchestra colouring the piano part with distinguished solos from Nicki Woods (cor anglais, second movement) and memorable interjections from Eb clarinet and trombone in the quirky tongue-in-cheek third movement.

All new works face a challenge to be understood in the absence of any pre-existing performances or recordings, a work that attempts to integrate innovative music, social history and storytelling especially so. The Three Spires team had wisely anticipated this challenge by organising two pre-concert events through which audiences could begin to unpick the complexities of Fitkin’s ‘Humphry Davy, the Age of Aspiration’: a seminar-style, three-way discussion and a pre-concert talk hosted by BBC presenter and Three Spires president, Petroc Trelawny.

Both of these events had told us much about Davy, but little about the music itself. Graham had thrown us a few morsels: it was to be a piece made up of layers: there would be breathing sounds and slowly sliding lines from the choir, a countertenor soloist who would adopt the persona of Davy himself, a children’s choir to depict the exploitation of children in the mines, and a narrator who would deliver historical context purely through speech. But until the baton went down we had no real idea what kind of stylistic sound-world to expect. Mercilessly modernistic? Meditatively minimalist? Or mindlessly mainstream? The opening inhalations and exhalations drifting almost imperceptibly from the choir suggested perhaps the former, but as the soloist and orchestra infilled with harmony and melody, so the tonal yet richly flavoured language unfolded. Beautiful, sonorous, at once dark and brooding and yet somehow filled with lightness and grace. This was complex but compelling music. Key changes slipped past almost before being noticed. At once it became clear why the choir had found learning their parts so difficult (one member had stated it was the hardest music they’d ever had to learn). Not because of the technical demands per se, but because their material acted as the essential mortar holding the numerous building blocks of the piece together, and stripped of the orchestral and solo elements during rehearsal, it must have seemed wayward and confusing. But while never perhaps appreciating how effective their presence was, under Christopher Gray’s guidance the choir performed with confidence and precision.

There were moments that to this reviewer’s ear didn’t always convince. The extremely high register of the countertenor seemed at odds with the character being portrayed and it was a musical decision that never quite became clear. Some of the text too felt a trifle awkward as libretto, though all credit to the composer for not having shoehorned the words into crude metric verses. Yet none of this fazed soloist Rory McCleary, who handled his material faultlessly, weaving some wonderful gentle melodies through the texture. The parallel strand of commentary, powerfully declaimed without ever slipping into melodrama by actor Sam West, added real depth to the work; and here the pre-concert talks proved to be very helpful, allowing the lines to be pared right down and still convey their meaning and importance.

With so many layers to contend with, and being on such a grand scale, the music’s shape needed meticulously crafting. In this, the composer succeeded so admirably that it was hard to believe nearly forty minutes had past as the work drew to a close. Fitkin remained acutely mindful of the cathedral’s echoey acoustic; the music being mostly slow and with the faster sections strategically placed. The first of these, where the children’s choir makes its only appearance, invokes the clang and clatter of deep seam working and heralds in the darkest, most chilling and moving middle section. The second takes the music into its profound concluding section where all the strands finally coalesce and the narrative resonates with our own time (the notion of asphyxiation indirectly alluding to George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement).

Minimalist composers have experimented with narrative since the 1970s, through both stage and concert works. At times it can be a strained marriage between the static nature of the musical style and the forward drive and pacing of storytelling. Saturday’s premiere showed that ‘Humphry Davy, The Age of Aspiration’ comes closer than many to solving this conundrum.

Readers who have not yet have had a chance to hear the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra should reach for their diaries and make a note of their next concert: Saturday April 2nd 2022, the programme comprising Russell Pascoe’s *Secular Requiem*, Mendelssohn’s *Hear My Prayer* and Brahms’ *Alto Rhapsody*. A treat not to be missed!

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