

THREE SPIRES CONCERT REVIEW: BACH MASS IN B MINOR

Last month's Three Spires performance of the Mass in B Minor was introduced by the Very Revd. Roger Bush, Dean of Truro Cathedral, who reflected upon the status and genius of this late work of Bach's and dedicated the concert with affection and sadness to the recently deceased David Frost, composer, teacher, former lead trumpeter of the Three Spires Orchestra and an inspirational local musical figure.

From the moment the opening 'Kyrie' burst forth, the Dean's words were fully realised; even from my seat just feet from the players and soloists the glorious music infused the cathedral from east window to west tower, from pews to vaulted ceiling. Bass and tenor voices had to work hard to match the power and security of the altos and sopranos, but the overall balance between choir and orchestra was excellent.

The first duet introduced us to alto Tim Carleston and soprano Katie Trethewey. Both singers approached the score with the utmost sensitivity. Though the alto part was at times masked by the soprano's brighter and more clearly enunciated lines the combined clarity of tone, modest use of vibrato and clearly shaped ornamentation felt entirely appropriate to the Baroque idiom.

The following Gloria added warm and sonorous brass colours to the sound. Conductor Christopher Gray set a stirring tempo for this movement, a testament to the ensemble playing and tightness of articulation that the energy and complex counterpoint still came through so powerfully, given the highly reverberant acoustic (it takes all of eight seconds for any given note to fully die away).

As the music cadenced into the 'Laudamus Te' the musical textures took on a more chamber-like character: sublime singing from soprano soloist supported by solo violin (a notable performance by leader Philip Montgomery-Smith), lightly scored string harmonies and a delicate continuo of cello and bass. This lightness of touch carried over into the 'Domine Deus'; the soloist now joined by tenor Kieran White, who proved to be the perfect match for the soprano's dynamics and clarity of articulation. The challenge for any singer here is to be able to squeeze all the words into such fast-tripping quavers. While Katie Trethewey's masterly diction served her extremely well for the most part, the end syllables were occasionally chopped short as she raced to begin the next line. Against this two-part writing, a solo flute spun a third musical thread, the line beautifully rendered by lead flautist Emma Jose. A second flute (Sarah Hanley) then joined for the 'Qui Tollis' as the lower vocal role passed from tenor to alto. Tim Carleston here needed a little more control over dynamics and pitching (I heard afterwards he was fighting a cold.)

Finally, as the first half of the concert drew towards its close, bassist Christopher Dollins made his first entry with the 'Quoniam tu solus sanctus'. His approach was fastidious and polished, if a little less expressive than that taken by the other soloists. Enormous skill was also demanded here of the first horn: requiring it to enter out of the blue on a written top C. Jacqueline Kershaw made it nevertheless seem effortless. The conductor pushed the tempo further still for the final 'Cum Sancto Spiritu', taking us into the interval at an exhilarating speed.

Part two opened with the 'Credo'. The 'Crucifixus' in particular contains some of Bach's most extraordinary and visionary music; dissonances and suspensions that intrigue, delight and confuse the ear all at once. Soloists and choir alike handled this dark heart of the Mass with great mastery. Christopher Gray never once milked these moments for overt effect, but allowed the music to speak for itself while maintaining the momentum and a setting a keen, driving pace.

Celestial brass joined the texture for the 'Et Resurrexit', showing that in David Frost's absence, the lead trumpet role was, with David Shead, in safe hands. The contrast with the ensuing 'Et in Spiritum Sanctum' was striking: a return to chamber music, with two oboe d'amores (Tamsin Robinson and Nicki Woods) joining Barbara Degener's sure-footed continuo line in support of Christopher Dollins' bass solo. From here the music again became dark and chromatic, a little challenging at times for the choir to keep balance and timing together, as the Credo drew to its end and led us into the 'Sanctus'.

The programme note for the concert declares that Bach '...probably knew he would never write a better Sanctus.' Certainly the combined effect of this section and the 'Agnus Dei' that follows is to leave the listener totally transported to another place. Christopher Gray brought the very best out of his singers and players for this stupendous ending. The music was left to shimmer in the air before anyone could bring themselves to break the silence with their applause. When it did come, that applause was vigorous and sustained. The four singers took their well-earned bows; Christopher Gray brought lead players from within the orchestra to their feet before turning to acknowledge the ovation he so admirably deserved. We left the cathedral spiritually uplifted and assured that it had been a performance that would have made its dedicatee, David Frost, extremely proud.

Readers who have not yet 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 July 7th, a performance of Elgar's masterpiece *The Dream of Gerontius*. A treat not to be missed!

Chris Best 9/4/18