**JULY CONCERT REVIEW**

**Three Spires Singers and Orchestra perform Bach, Handel and Buxtehude**

On Saturday 6th July the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra treated audiences to a feast of Baroque music dedicated to the magnification of God. Choral works by Bach and Handel formed the centrepieces of the programme, while additional instrumental and vocal interludes included the **Magnificat**, thought to be by Dietrich Buxtehude.  This simple and charming opener was performed with crystal-like clarity by the choir and strings and introduced the evening's four soloists, Cheryl Rosevear (soprano), Felicity Turner (mezzo-soprano), Joseph Wicks (tenor) and George Clark (bass), who performed their duets and quartets against a delicate backdrop of organ and cello continuo with choral responses.
The evening's theme continued with conductor Christopher Gray moving from podium to organ for Bach's **Fuga Sopra Il Magnificat**. Here was a rare chance to audition the cathedral's fine organ couched within an orchestral concert setting. A concentrated, no-frills performance, it admirably brought out the fugue's independent lines, each delicately coloured by sensitive registration. TV screens were on-hand to offer insights into the workings of an organist's feet on the pedal board, though sadly these were placed too far back to be visible from the front rows.
After his solo venture, Chris Gray could relax while the orchestra performed without conductor Handel's **The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba** (probably the evening's best-known work). Though the choice seemed a little out of context, orchestra and audience alike clearly loved this work and oboists Tamsin Robinson and Nicki Woods performed flawlessly, with the continuo again in the assured hands of Barbara Degener (cello) and Paul Comeau (chamber organ).
Having sat out of the preceding two performances, the chorus took a moment to find its focus for Bach's **Cantata no. 10 'Meine Seel'**. The text-setting in this work is highly elaborated, with overlapping lines that make the words at times hard to unravel and this was not helped by some timing and rhythmic issues at the start. But things quickly settled into place in readiness for the first aria. Soprano Cheryl Rosevear took this solo in her stride, making light work of the somewhat awkward 'feminine' endings to the third and sixth lines. The gritty second aria 'Gewaltige stötβt Gott vom Stuhl' (The mighty ones doth God unseat) gave bass George Clark the opportunity to assert his full range over a tortuous melody filled with running passages and wide leaps. While his voice is still developing towards ultimate maturity, already he shows enormous potential - and his German was exemplary.
In the recitatives that linked the arias and chorales, tenor Joseph Wicks conjured a pure and beguiling tone and a lovely sense of musical phrasing. It is the job of recitative to follow the punctuation marks in the text with appropriate cadences - unresolved (*imperfect*) for commas and closed (*perfect*) for full stops, which can all too often force these passages into being little more than vehicles for the narrative. Here though, the closing text runs uninterrupted for eleven lines before the final full stop, allowing Bach the chance to create extended melody on an almost aria-like scale.
The choir brought the cantata to an impassioned close with the final chorale 'Glory be to the Father'.
The second half of the evening comprised just two works: Bach's popular **Violin Concerto in E** and Handel's **Dixit Dominus**. Philip Montgomery-Smith took the solo in the Bach, choosing a restrained approach, placing himself sideways on to the audience and preferring to let the solo line sit within the orchestral texture rather than assert its independence. Despite such a modest approach, real character and beauty emerged in his playing during the second movement, with delicate ornamentation and warmth of tone. By the third movement he was on full power and clearly more comfortable in the spotlight.
If it had seemed that the choir was going to be given an easy ride with this concert, the **Dixit Dominus** at once proved otherwise. The writing makes enormous demands on everyone involved and if at times it felt as though the ensemble was barely keeping up with the conductor's beat and numerous tempo changes, the energy and majesty of this phenomenal work still came through loud and clear. The choral sound had weight and power; the orchestra had pace and passion; soloists gave everything they had. Felicity Turner used her uncanny ability to capture each musical nuance in her eyes and to scan the auditorium, projecting those nuances into every corner. The delicious two-part 'De torrente' (He shall drink of the brook), which she shared with soprano Cheryl Rosevear, was for this reviewer perhaps the highlight of the whole evening.
Whether religious or not, one cannot help but be moved by an event of such sustained immersion in the act of glorification. After the Handel's closing Amen, audiences slowly dispersed, each uplifted and changed by these timeless works and grateful to the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra for making it such a memorable occasion.

Chris Best
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