

## **ANGMERING CHORALE - Belgium – 31 May to 3 June 2018**

The Sun rose blearily through the early morning mists of the Arun valley, as in similar mood, forty four members and friends of the Angmering Chorale struggled to reach their Worthing rendezvous - a luxury coach waiting to whisk them painlessly o'er the Channel and the Flanders fields to Brussels.

In spite of the early hour, all managed to make it on time, and they were soon dozing or chatting in comfort as the miles slipped effortlessly away.

Meanwhile, Belgium was still abed, mostly unaware of Angmering's meticulously organised invasion plans, many months in the making.

Their target, the cathedrals of Brussels and Ghent. Their weapons, a rich and varied selection of the best loved Oratorios. Their reward, a chance to sing together in some of the most beautiful and atmospheric spaces in Europe.

After a quick and uneventful journey, they arrived mid afternoon at the Brussels City Hilton, after which all were free to leisurely sample the delights of this attractive city. Until, that is, the afternoon of the following day, when all excitedly met up for rehearsal at the St Michael and St Gudula cathedral.

It did not disappoint.

A delightfully light and attractive gothic exterior was started in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, and took three hundred years to finish. It was worth the wait. It is matched by a beautiful but restrained interior, with excellent acoustics. The main organ is a beautiful instrument created in the year 2000 by the "Daring genius" of the German organ-builder, Gerhard Grenzing, based in Barcelona, in collaboration with the English architect, Simon Platt. The seventeenth century pulpit and the sixteenth century stained glass windows are of a very high standard too – all creating an inspiring atmosphere in which to sing great works.

The rehearsal, conducted by George Jones (Conductor and Musical Director) with Alison Manton providing piano accompaniment of the highest standard, confirmed the remarkable acoustic of the building, to the delight of all concerned. The afternoon was regrettably marred by a choir member's unfortunate fall and resultant doubly broken wrist, after the rehearsal. This was endured by the victim with remarkable good cheer, and much care and support from other choir members.

The performance itself began at 1500hrs and was witnessed by over five hundred people.

There was some puzzlement initially that George's normal lighthearted and witty introductions were not producing the normal appreciative response from the audience. A sea of blank faces and apparently deaf ears confronted the performers when even George's

jolliest jokes seemed to fall quite flat. Belgians are not famous for a lack of a sense of humour, and once it was realized that he could not actually be heard, the solution was quickly found.

So, to the music:

**“Sleep well”** from Bach’s St John Passion. This relatively simple piece was delivered with power and passion by the choir.

**“In Paradisum”** by Faure. Sung with fine delicacy and control.

**“See the conquering hero comes”** Handel’s Judas Maccabeus. Sung with great energy.

**“Dona nobis pacem”** from Haydn’s Harmoniemesse. Controlled and touching.

**“He watching over Israel”** from Mendelssohn’s Elijah. The choir sang quietly but clearly.

**“Lacrimosa”** and **“Hostias”** from Mozart’s Requiem. Both difficult, powerful and moving pieces sung with great control and energy.

**“Gloria”** and **“Et in terra pax”** Vivaldi Gloria. Choir displayed their great versatility.

**“Jerusalem”** by Parry. Delivered with gusto, encouraged by George’s enthusiastic organ accompaniment.

**“Jazz Missa Brevis”** Will Todd’s classic piece sung respectfully by the choir and much enjoyed by the audience.

**“Hallelujah Chorus”** from Handel’s Messiah”. A fittingly rumbustious end to an excellent performance.

The next day saw the group whisked away to Ghent, a beautiful city with centuries of history oozing from every brick and tile. Their visit began with a view of the city by open boat, in the company of a guide-come-skipper whose encyclopedic knowledge of the city’s fascinating history was engagingly exposed, sugared with a relaxed, sardonically humorous style that could not fail to appeal.

A short break for lunch, and then to Saint Bavo’s Cathedral – and what a difference ! The combination of darker stone and heavy ornamentation created an altogether more sombre and powerful impression, augmented, once inside, by some richly ornate carvings, paintings and superb stained glass windows.

Rehearsals were over without incident, and confirmed another high quality acoustic. The audience was treated to an excellent repeat performance, enlivened by George’s evident delight in being able to first improvise and then energetically accompany “Jerusalem” on the Cathedral’s magnificent organ. (“The biggest in the Benelux”).

The audience declined George's invitation for them to step up and join the chorale for the final "Hallelujah" chorus, but, undaunted, the choir gave a typically robust and enthusiastic rendering which was very well received by the audience, its numbers swollen by literally hundreds of tourists.

The trip home, the following day, was interrupted at Calais by the discovery, courtesy of a UK Customs' "Sniffer" dog, of a human stowaway underneath the coach. This unfortunate young man, apparently from Eritrea, had managed to conceal himself sufficiently to evade detection by all but the four legged inspector.

Having convinced Customs that all reasonable checks had been carried out by the coach driver, the group were eventually allowed on the ferry, arriving back at Worthing just before sunset - tired but well satisfied with their ambitious efforts. A feeling perhaps shared by the Sun itself as it sank below the horizon – doubtless wondering where and when the next beneficiary of the group's impressive concert programme might be.

To find out, it had only to visit the website of the Angmering Chorale on [www.theangmeringchorale.org.uk](http://www.theangmeringchorale.org.uk)