

ANGMERING CHORALE – BRANDENBURG 2019

The afternoon of Saturday 2nd February 2019 saw the Angmering Chorale in two coaches cruising effortlessly northwards through glorious sun-soaked Sussex scenery. There was barely a hint of the recent snows, with only the odd patch remaining beneath the denser hedges.

Their task - to perform at the annual Brandenburg Choral Festival of London. Their programme, “A Little Jazz Mass” by Bob Chilcott, and the powerful anti-war “A Mass for Peace”, “The Armed Man”, by the Chorale’s illustrious patron, Karl Jenkins.

The venue was the Priory Church of Saint Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield, London’s oldest surviving parish church. Founded in 1123, its chequered history includes in various parts a blacksmith, a school, a printing works, a house, and a lace and fringe factory, none of which detracts from its current presence which is hugely impressive, seriously beautiful, and blessed with excellent acoustics.

First to perform was the Choir of King’s College, London, whose gorgeous rendering of Thomas Tallis’ “Spem in Alium” had the whole audience spellbound, setting a high standard for Angmering to follow.

If they were worried, they had no reason to be.

They excelled.

From the thrilling opening sextet, “L’homme Arme” of “The Armed Man”, the Chorale, under its cheerful conductor, George Jones, gave a controlled, sensitive and powerful performance throughout, responding faithfully to the alternating optimism and grim reality of its subject.

Alison Manton as usual coped admirably with a challenging accompanist role on the piano.

Soloists for the day, Jo Lecuyer, Michelle Woodward, Oliver Martin, Trevor Mills, Andy Cresswell, and Jez Arnold stepped up from the choir, singing to a highly professional standard, and Oliver Martin’s thoughtful cello solo which begins the Benedictus, set a suitably serene and touching tone, contrasting beautifully with the subsequent explosive full choir Hosanna.

The composer resists the temptation of a triumphalist finale, apparently preferring to send his audience home in a reflective, rather sombre mood – as befits the subject, which is dedicated to those who suffered in the Kosovo conflict towards the end of the last, obscenely destructive century.

A much lighter tone was set by the Chorale’s second offering, “A little Jazz Mass” by Englishman Bob Chilcott. Here, the serious words of the Latin Missa Brevis are offset by a score which draws mostly from the composer’s love of jazz and the blues particularly.

This allowed the Chorale to fully demonstrate its flexibility, switching effortlessly to this totally different style. Alison in particular delighted in the changed mood, which allowed her to display her quite astonishing versatility.

Although finishing on a serious anti war note, the concluding Dona Nobis Pacem - a powerful plea for peace - was hopeful and cheerful.

Brian North

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