

**A Cornucopia of Musical Riches for an Historic Occasion:  
Thames Philharmonic Choir's summer concert at All Saints'**

A celebration of English music (and a little Gershwin) marked the passing of an era on 15<sup>th</sup> June with Artistic Director John Bate's farewell concert with the Thames Philharmonic Choir, which he founded 55 years ago, known for many years as the John Bate Choir. The programme was an interesting choice for a choir that has cemented its outstanding reputation on the glorious wealth of the Austro-German musical tradition. Germany was not absent from the proceedings, however, as guests of honour included the director of the Symphonic Choir of Konstanz, with which the Thames Philharmonic has enjoyed a very fruitful partnership over many years. The Mayors (or Deputy Mayor) of all three London boroughs served by the Thames Philharmonic were also present to mark this very special occasion in the historic setting of All Saints', Kingston upon Thames, where Saxon kings were crowned and "where England began" according to the tourist literature.

A latter day coronation piece marked the opening of the concert, Hubert Parry's *Coronation anthem: I was glad when they said unto me*. Composed for the coronation of Edward VII in 1902, the work was revised for the coronation of George V in 1911. Conceived as a ceremonial greeting as the monarch entered Westminster Abbey, it opens with a magnificent organ blast before the choir enters with words from Psalm 122. Full of imperial splendour, the anthem nevertheless contains a gentler passage in "*O pray for the peace of Jerusalem*" before the rousing finale.

Stephen Disley was once again invited to perform with the choir as organist. A highly regarded and celebrated musician, he has appeared with numerous major orchestras and vocal ensembles. He is Sub-Organist at Southwark Cathedral, where he established the Girls' Choir. It was a fitting conclusion to his relationship with John Bate that he performed on this occasion two of Herbert Howells' organ rhapsodies, *Op. 17 no. 1* and *Op. 17 no. 3*. The former opened with dark tones, then alternated between lighter and more tempestuous passages before concluding in a languorous mood. *No. 3* in contrast had a very affirmative ending following passages of angst and serenity. It was a joy to hear performed so well such works on All Saints' celebrated Frobenius organ.

Between the organ rhapsodies, Vaughan Williams' *Five Mystical Songs* formed the heart of the first half of the concert. Described by him in the programme as, "The greatest composer of the English twentieth-century musical renaissance.", John Bate drew exquisite performances from the choir and the outstanding baritone soloist, Dan D'Souza, continuing the Thames Philharmonic's tradition of championing talented young musicians. D'Souza sang with the All Saints' Church choir, was educated at Tiffin Boys' School and, following his studies at Cambridge and the Royal College of Music, won last year two prestigious vocal prizes. Following the brief organ cue, D'Souza opened the cycle in commanding style and employed throughout a very impressive range of vocal colour and technique: the plaintive, the affirmative, the lyrical, the pastoral, the celebratory and the playful, complemented sensitively, and where necessary forcefully, by the choir and organ. The cycle concluded thrillingly with, "*Let all the world in every corner sing, / My God and King.*"

Sir Hubert Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens*, a staple of the English choral repertoire since its composition in 1887, concluded the first half. The text is from an ode by John Milton, but it was hard not to feel that it was more inspired by an even older text, Homer's *The Odyssey*. A careful mariner might have chosen to be bound to the mast, as the women's voices gloriously expressed passages of ecstasy, along with the swelling and ebbing of the male voices and organ.

Charles Villiers Stanford's *Songs of the Fleet* provided the main fare in the second half of the concert, for which the accompaniment was provided by the gifted pianist and musical director, Benjamin Costello, until recently a significant part of the Thames Philharmonic Choir's pool of talent as rehearsal pianist and assistant to the Artistic Director. Stanford taught numerous significant composers, including Vaughan Williams and Frank Bridge, and made a very important contribution to the development of English music. Set to verse by Henry Newbolt (1862 – 1938), the cycle provided another opportunity for the baritone soloist, Dan D'Souza, to shine. Many moods are evoked in the songs: expansiveness, stormy drama, ethereal beauty, the loneliness and vastness of the ocean, imperial confidence, ominous dark clouds and playfulness. At times, there were hints too of Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*, especially in the percussive passages of *The Song of the Sou'Wester*. *Fare Well* concluded the cycle with hymn-like qualities preceding the evocation of awe in the finale and the dramatic closing chords on the piano.

Rounding off this historic concert were three songs by George and Ira Gershwin: *I got rhythm*, *'S wonderful*, *Summer time*. They provided an opportunity for a little light-hearted entertainment after the more serious fare. The songs are nevertheless musical masterpieces and were performed with great affection and care by the assembled musical forces with John Bate's finely commanding musical direction remaining focused to the closing bars. He will be with the Choir again for the choral services that form part of the summer residency at Winchester Cathedral in July, but this concert marked the end of an era and the passing on of a truly remarkable legacy to John Bate's successors.

Colin Bloxham, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019

**Standing ovation for John Bate, All Saints' Kingston, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2019**

