

## Thames Philharmonic Choir's Visions of Heaven and Hell at the Cadogan Hall

A triumphant concert given by the Thames Philharmonic Choir, south-west London's foremost choral ensemble, at the Cadogan Hall on 1st April demonstrated again its ambitious programming in performing two large-scale works that we rarely have the opportunity to hear in public: Vaughan Williams' *Sancta Civitas* (The Holy City) and Puccini's *Messa di Gloria*.

The performance of *Sancta Civitas* was made possible thanks to a generous bequest from a former member of the Choir, Ian Buist, as well as to support from The Vaughan Williams Charitable Trust. The work calls for substantial musical forces. In addition to those of the Choir and of the Thames Festival Orchestra, they were augmented by, from an elevated position on one side of the concert platform, the boy trebles of Shrewsbury House Singers under the direction of Benjamin Costello, and, from the opposite side, by the Wimbledon Youth Choir directed by Max Barley. Two outstanding soloists complemented the assembled forces: Matthew Hargreaves (bass-baritone) and Adam Tunnicliffe (tenor).

The opening orchestral passage was dominated by the ominously haunting bass strings. As the bass-baritone soloist commenced the recitation of text drawn from *The Book of Revelation*, the Choir slowly and inexorably added layers to the aural landscape of The Book's Vision of St John, in which a great multitude is spoken of, as well as a battle between Good and Evil. As the voices swelled, they were punctuated by a blazing trumpet fanfare, which introduced the boys' choir, quickly followed by the mainly girls' choir opposite. Throughout, the interplay between the musical forces was thrilling, at times as breath-taking as top-level tennis rallies as the Wimbledon Youth Choir exchanged aural volleys with the main choir. The music was, though, sensual as well as dramatic. The large orchestra, under its new Leader – Alison Kelly, was superb, with the palettes of brass, percussion and strings exquisitely illuminating the celestial battlefield. At a central moment in the work, announcing "... a new heaven and a new earth;..." Kelly's violin dominated the hall in a sublimely ethereal fashion. The musical *coup de théâtre* was delivered, however, towards the very end of the work by tenor Adam Tunnicliffe, from a balcony high above the platform, in which, as a divine presence, he assured us, "Behold, I come quickly, I am the bright and morning star." It provided a startling and poignant conclusion to a very moving work in which Williams gave expression to his experiences of serving in the First World War.

Puccini's youthful *Messa di Gloria* required slightly reduced forces compared with the concert's opening work. The constituent parts are not given equal weight in the way they are in a more conventional setting of a Mass. It points very much to the operatic path that Puccini was to follow so successfully subsequently in his career. Nevertheless, the musical gems contained therein are not to be disregarded, especially those of the dominant Gloria, almost a complete work in itself. Initially, however, the luscious string sounds of the opening Kyrie suggested light entertainment, but this short section soon gave way to more substantial fare.

Happily, the workload was shared more evenly by the soloists in this work than in the Vaughan Williams. It was a treat to hear much more the confident, expansive tones of tenor Adam Tunnicliffe and to enjoy bass-baritone Matthew Hargreaves' exhilarating command of Puccini's dramatic musical range. The Choir too was thrilling to listen to as its constituent parts wrestled impressively with the epic scale of the piece, producing a stunning crescendo at the end of the Gloria. The remainder of the work seemed almost like an encore, albeit a very generous and enjoyable one.

Throughout the concert the Artistic Director, John Bate, conducted with exemplary command, producing committed, expressive and finely judged performances from all on the platform. The Thames Philharmonic Choir's impressive record of producing outstanding musical experiences, and of fostering youthful talent, seems to be in safe hands for a long time to come.

Colin Bloxham  
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