

Dartington Community Choir Choral Workshop and Concert

Saturday 29th February 2020

Buckfast Abbey, Devon

Year on year those who regularly attend the Dartington Community Choir's Workshop have come to expect a very high standard. 2020 was no exception and it was a great pleasure to see new faces and to welcome back many who have attended in the past; and, as ever, people had travelled from all over the UK.

The work that goes into delivering such an event is enormous. Carol Robinson has, for quite a few years now, been the mastermind behind inspirational choices in music directors, venues, myriad plans and decisions; and this year was no exception. Most ably assisted by Robyn Roberts plus a willing and extremely hardworking team of choir volunteers, this year's Workshop proved yet another sell-out success. It was a truly wonderful day.

'Unexpected obstacles in driving area' caused by the Storm Jorge, threatened to disrupt the start as Tom Seligman had to negotiate landslip and flood to get to Buckfast but finally we were all assembled. The sun shone down and we set to work; and before we knew it, we'd covered almost the entire programme of music in our morning rehearsal in the Abbey Conference Centre. The afternoon rehearsal in the Abbey itself enabled us to put all the pieces together with our soloists and the magnificent Ruffatti organ before supper in The Grange Restaurant and the evening concert.

We were incredibly fortunate to have Tom as our music director this year. Much in demand and experienced across symphonic and choral repertoires, opera and ballet, Tom is often to be found at the Royal Opera House when not criss-crossing the globe. The combination of the setting of Buckfast Abbey and its magnificent organ clearly inspired Tom's theme of singing through the Church year. His themes were Journeys, Christmas and Jerusalem. Easter and Sacrifice. Rejoicing and Out into the World.

Journeys, Christmas and Jerusalem: We started with Christmas, rejoicing in Jesus' birth with Mendelssohn's *Weihnachten: Frohlocket, ihr Völker auf Erden* (first of the Six Sayings). A happy piece to start the day. Next, we travelled to Jerusalem and raised the roof with Parry's *I was Glad*. I don't know a choral singer who doesn't love singing that piece and to perform it in the Abbey was a glorious experience. Cornelius' *The Three Kings* [for cello and choir] took us on the Three Kings' journey to worship the newborn babe. A lovely combination of well-known music with a flowing cello accompaniment from Jeremy Capey. Jeremy also treated us to Bach's 'Gigue' from his 3rd Cello Suite. A delight to listen to and a welcome rest before we sang Britten's *Jubilate Deo*.

This was followed by the first of the programme's readings. The Annunciation from John O'Donohue's *The Rosary Sonnets*, very beautifully read by Wendy Newman. Tom had asked her to read each poem twice the better for us to really take in the words. It was very effective.

Easter and Sacrifice: Soprano Charlotte Briem started this section giving us the most beautiful rendition of Marian Sawa's Magnificat, accompanied by Jeremy Capey on the cello and Peter King on the organ. Ireland's Greater Love, a personal favourite of Tom's, followed in which we acknowledged there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends. The choir gave it their all while Matt Hulbert and Charlotte Briem added a special something with their solo lines. John O'Donohue's The Nativity was then most movingly read by Wendy. Schumann's Study in Canonic Form arranged for Cello and Organ gave us another chance to sit back and listen to Jeremy Capey's sublime playing. Mendelssohn: Um unsrer Sünden willen (last of the Six Sayings) took us solemnly through Good Friday and this was followed by Puccini's Requiem Aeterna [for choir, cello and organ] Eternal Rest, Grant them O Lord, was a beautiful and poignant piece.

Wendy's final reading was of 'Fluent' also by John O'Donohue. Just a few lines. And very beautiful.

Then we were into Rejoicing!

First a superb performance of Saint-Saëns Fantaisie no 1. Peter King and the Abbey's superb organ gave of their best with this magnificent voluntary and we listened quite spellbound.

Finally, Tom took us 'Out into the World' with Elgar: The Spirit of the Lord from The Apostles and we closed our programme with another roof-raiser in David Willcock's arrangement of Widor's Toccata, Sing! I think even Tom was surprised at the volume he got from us in the last piece. That music most often played at weddings had been transformed by David Willcocks into the most joyous piece for all of us singers to sing. The packed audience in the Abbey certainly showed their appreciation at the end of this very moving performance.

With his early background as a chorister, Tom's love of choral music was evident. There was an element of great profundity to the event with the choice of music, both choral and instrumental, skilfully interwoven with John O'Donohue's moving poems and beautifully played Cello solos.

For me, it was a wonderful musical journey and a very rewarding day. A huge thank you to Tom and all those who contributed to making it such an enjoyable workshop. A veritable box of musical delights. And a wonderful memory to have during these extraordinary days of lock-down.

Cath Collins