

A glorious day of singing with Matthew Coleridge

Buckfast Abbey, 2nd March 2019

140 singers from across Devon and beyond arrived early on a wet and windy March day at Buckfast Abbey, full of anticipation and curiosity. Many of the participants in the sell out all day workshop were from the local Dartington Community Choir (DCC), a non-auditioned choir. In line with the choir's ethos the workshop was open to all singers from anywhere, regardless of musical skill or experience. This was the first workshop organised by DCC at Buckfast Abbey, and we were learning a new and unknown work for most of us, Matthew Coleridge's Requiem, only composed in 2016 with just a few public performances to date. To add to the excitement, and nervous anxiety for some, the composer himself was leading the workshop and we were to perform the Requiem that evening (together with Vaughan Williams 'Five Mystical Songs' and a brand new anthem composed by Matt Coleridge) to a paying audience in the Abbey, which was already sold out. Would our individual and combined musical skills and our stamina be sufficient?

Our anxieties quickly subsided as we were settled into the large conference hall by welcoming smiles from the DCC hosts and by Matthew Coleridge himself, who led us with humour, skill and encouragement through the Requiem. He gave us interesting personal insights into how he had composed the work over a long period, and how it had finally come together into a single work. He broke it down into manageable chunks, kept a relaxed but motivating pace, and even managed to provide some brief sectional practice in our own voice parts by staggering the coffee break. Aply supported by Robin Stubbs' piano accompaniment, we were amazed how much of the both the Requiem and Mystical Songs we had covered by lunchtime, relieved also to realise how much would be sung by soloists.



The atmosphere immediately and rapidly rose as we packed into the Abbey Choir Stalls and central Choir. The huge acoustic of the Abbey's high vaulted ceilings and magnificent new organ, played by Abbey organist David Davies, lifted our hearts and voices. We had already been introduced to our Cello soloist, Jeremy Capey, brother of Dartington Community Choir's Musical Director Simon Capet (today singing with the tenor section). The beautiful tone of Jeremy's playing and the composer's musical lines found a lyrical voice that was audible even above 140 choral voices, from the exquisite stillness of the Introit, through the Kyrie, Agnus Dei and into the final Lacrimosa. The sombre march like opening of the Kyrie was captured by Steve Bentley on tenor drum. The cello's deep, slow and sorrowful flow

again gently underpinned the pleading soaring notes of Soprano soloist Isabella Wagner in the Pie Jesu. In glorious contrast, the organ and choir volume ebbed and swelled with the broad lush harmonies of the Offertory, including a moving solo entrance by DCC Choir member Matt Hulbert, and the exhilarating organ trumpet stops and clashing percussion of the Rex Tremendae.

We had less time than some of us would have liked to rehearse the Vaughan Williams Five Mystical Songs and the Matthew Coleridge's new anthem, 'And I Saw a New Heaven', composed especially for the DCC Workshop. But we were reassured by the confidence of our two local soloists, Isabel Wagner and Matthew Hulbert who appeared undaunted by the scale of the Abbey and performance ahead. Their voices, and the wonderful organ and cello accompaniments carried these works with the choir providing a quiet, almost 'background' role, again beautifully enhanced by the Abbey acoustic.

Any concerns at the start of the day about our stamina holding out for an evening concert were dispelled by a fortifying two course supper in the Abbey Refectory, together with a good length break with time to relax quietly or to chat to friends old and new. A rapid change into black concert dress and a collective desire to rise to the occasion and to do justice to Matthew's composition and musical direction all provided the final adrenalin needed as we dashed through wind and rain from the Medieval Guest Hall into the packed, beautifully lit Abbey.



The beauty of the words and music of Vaughan William's Mystical Songs, ending in the dramatic fanfares of 'All People that on Earth do Dwell', followed by the powerful Soprano and Cello accompaniment of Coleridge's 'And I saw a new heaven', served as a spiritual and atmospheric 'warm up' for the audience and choir alike. But in the end, it was the instrumental and choral lyricism and power of the Requiem, enhanced by the awe and majesty of the Abbey, which lifted the whole day and final performance into the uplifting and unforgettable experience it

was a privilege to be part of. Thank you, Matthew Coleridge, Dartington Community Choir workshop organisers and helpers, Buckfast Abbey, accompanists, soloists and all singers for making this possible.

Juliet Hancock