

Botley Choral Society: Centenary Concert **19th November 2022**

A packed church greeted the 100th anniversary and celebratory concert of Botley Choral Society. With the choir resplendent, lit up by midnight blue scarves enhancing traditional black concert dress, what a jubilant programme this was!

The Choir opened with one of Handel's four Coronation Anthems, 'Zadok the Priest', but with a difference - which both intrigued and delighted the audience - with the choir divided between the front and the back of the Church. As the introductory ritornello by the ensemble moved forward to the first splendid entry by the Choir, the audience was then immersed and surrounded by the music - a rare treat. The ensemble settled well into the piece, and all was magnificently led by Music Director and Conductor, David Burgess. Further treats were to follow.

Handel's, 'The Trumpet shall Sound' (from The Messiah), brought together bass, Tim Burt, trumpet player, Paul Hart, and organist, Mark Dancer, with the accompanying ensemble opening with energy, crispness, and responsiveness. The trumpeter, playing from the pulpit, played with lightness, dexterity, and an expressive, almost baroque tone, balancing well with the soloist. The aria makes great demands on the bass soloist with many long mellifluous phrases, but this was carried off with sensitivity.

Lovelady's 'Psalm 104' performed by the four soloists was a delight (Helen Bailey (Soprano), Marie-Anne Hall (Contralto), Adrian Green (Tenor) and Tim Burt (Bass)). Originally commissioned for the 75th Birthday of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, the version we heard was arranged by James Vivian, Director of Music for the St Georges Chapel, Windsor. The tenor soloist, Adrian Green, was particularly noteworthy and the ensemble singing towards the end of the piece was glorious.

Further Handel gems (from Samson) followed: 'Let the bright Seraphim' brought back trumpet player, Paul Hart, this time in duet with Soprano, Helen Bailey, and the Choir then went straight into, 'Let their celestial concerts all unite'. They declaimed the opening words with great commitment moving between homophonic and contrapuntal styles of writing, some passages requiring almost athletic musicianship, and displayed great use of dynamics, contrasting with the final joyous praise to God, 'in endless morn of light'.

The first half ended with another of the four Coronation anthems, 'The King shall rejoice'. What a magnificent piece this is, with its glorious and joyous opening movement. Crisp ensemble playing set the scene for the Choir's incisive entry. The second movement, 'Exceeding glad shall he be', was at first playful in mood, contrasting with reflective passages led initially by the choir altos with a beautifully delivered series of suspensions across the parts. The brief celebratory third movement, 'Glory and Great Worship', led into the fourth, 'Thou hast prevented him'. Altos and tenors were notable in their blended singing, and, with some confident entries from basses and sopranos, this led to the final glorious movement, 'Hallelujah' with its double fugue, well delivered by all.

With the second half's performance of Mozart's Coronation Mass, the Choir and soloists seemed to step up even further, displaying a renewed sense of confidence and musical expression. The expansive opening 'Kyrie' with its dynamic contrasts and varied timbre including the section with the soloists, set the standard and tone for the whole performance. The 'Gloria' again interweaved full choral forces with the soloists' passages most effectively. Choir diction was clear and sung with commitment and with generally good communication with the audience. The third movement, the 'Credo', requires great choral focus and resilience, beginning as it does with a decisive and forceful rhythm with homophonic voices accompanied by the ever energetic ensemble, punctuated by

sforzandos which were delivered with great effectiveness. The soloists taking up the words, 'Et incarnatus est', created great contrast, and sang with increased harmonic and emotional intensity. The chorus picked up the returning change of tempo and mood well, leading to the final Amen. The short fourth movement, the Sanctus, is surprisingly complex to sustain given both its brevity and its largely homophonic choral texture. However the choir tackled this well and picked up the swifter moving 'Hosanna in excelsis', with dynamic commitment.

With always musical conducting from David Burgess, the quartet of soloists blended beautifully in the 'Benedictus' with excellent accompaniment reminiscent of a period ensemble. The chorus reinforced the message with their lively renderings of 'Hosanna in Excelsis'.

The 'Agnus Dei' was sublime in its delivery. The soprano soloist, Helen Bailey, sang with beauty and musical sensitivity, Here it is also worth specifically mentioning the oboes in the ensemble who interwove and accompanied the soprano soloist with expressive clarity, always well balanced. The tempos changed and first the quartet of soloists and then the choir entered, building towards the end. But ever musical, the choir demonstrated excellent and effective dynamic contrasts before the final, 'Dona nobis pacem'.

A last word of applause should go to conductor, David Burgess. This Centenary concert was a tour de force. A beautifully crafted and joyous programme, it demanded intense musicianship, focus, and leadership from its conductor. The performers - choir, soloists, and ensemble - were exceptionally well directed throughout, and facilitated by their conductor to produce performances of great integrity. They did indeed, 'do their forbears proud'.

Jane Bryant
21st November 2022