

Review of Hampshire Choral Festival performance of The Verdi Requiem at the Basingstoke Anvil Theatre on Sunday 11th May 2025

The choirs of Botley Choral Society, Compton and Shawford Festival Choir, Itchen Valley Choir, Overton Choral Society, Sarisbury Choral Society, the Twyford Singers and the Winchester City Festival Choir, joined forces with the Festival Orchestra and soloists Helen Bailey, Anna Loveday, Jonathan Cooke and Thomas Humphreys, under the baton of John Sutton, to perform the first performance of Derek Beck's *The Life of Universal Song* (conducted by the composer) and Verdi's *Requiem*.

There could not have been a better celebration of the wonderful British choral tradition than this compelling and moving performance.

Appropriately, the concert opened with Derek Beck's setting of Edmund Blunden's poem "For St Cecilia", a work which called on the harmonies and the expressive setting of English verse, with a famous musical quotation played by a fine solo trumpet.

From the very beginning of the Verdi, John Sutton created a hush in the hall which promised what he continued to create for us by his observant and finely judged tempi and awareness of the many moments of dramatic effect in a work which some critics have suggested is more of an opera than a religious work. From the singing of the well balanced choral voices, the fine playing of the orchestra and the impressive contributions of the very talented quartet of soloists, it was clear that he and the performers understood that the operatic intensity of the music would be put to the service of a deep and spiritual communication.

Verdi dedicated the work to the memory of his friend, the Italian poet, Alessandro Manzoni. The plea to free us from eternal death is somehow vividly personal. One of many special moments was when the massed choir chanted that text unaccompanied.

Each of the four soloists provided many such moments, whether evoking the tears of grief in "Lachrymosa" or the threat of the final judgement in "Liber scriptus"; or the plea for redemption from guilt in "Ingemisco tanquam reus"; or the beautifully intoned "Agnus Dei"; or the threat and contrition of "Confutatis"; and the final impassioned plea by the soprano followed by the mesmeric repetition of "Libera me" by the whole choir.

The responsibility of writing a review of such a special occasion has become a really pleasurable revisiting of my memories of the experience.

I consider the importance of taking part in, or indeed attending such an occasion, is surely a reminder of what is really important in our lives together. If we add to that the significant contribution which these choirs' performances have made to the Hospice movement it is appropriate to end this "review" by thanking John for his deeply perceptive music making and to all who have helped HCF in bringing this about with such notable success.

Professor Christopher Underwood