

Review of Botley Choral Society's Christmas Concert 2025 On Christmas Night (Chilcott) and other Carols for choir and audience

A full house, and an atmosphere of anticipation, greeted us as we arrived to take our seats for Botley Choral Society's Christmas Concert.

First up was Bob Chilcott's, 'On Christmas Night' and his sensitive and varied settings of eight carols that tell the Christmas Story from the fall of Adam, through the foretelling of the arrival of the Child, the journey of Mary and Joseph, and the birth and Nativity. What Chilcott does so well is to combine his own original settings with traditional and well-known carol melodies.

What was intriguing about Botley's performance was its creative use of space – indeed the whole church became a canvas for the performance, with, for several of the carols, small choral ensembles singing variously from the sides and from behind the audience. Well-directed by conductor David Burgess their role was to embed and immerse the audience in the familiar carol settings while the body of the choir variously led, enhanced, elucidated, accompanied, or contrasted - occasionally with plainsong-like melodies. The effect, on occasions, felt almost antiphonal-like, and undoubtedly added to the mystery, spirituality and musicality of the whole.

There was some lovely ensemble singing both from the whole choir and from the smaller choral ensembles with excellent blending of voices and good communication of both unison singing alongside rich harmonic moments. Examples of this were many and included 'A Spotless Rose', and, 'Sweet was the Song'. Diction overall was splendid and more than made up for very occasional loss of focus in just one or two entries. Indeed the performance was very effective in capturing the varied range of moods of the work from its gentle and reflective sections, to the vivacious, folklike, and jubilant - with particular reference here to the exuberant joyousness of 'Rejoice and be Merry'. Special mention should also be made of the small, high quality, instrumental ensemble. They were precise, variously incisive or sensitive - as demanded by the music - with some glorious playing.

With the arrival of several additional instrumentalists enlarging the ensemble, the concert then proceeded with a selection of carols, many from the collection in Carols for Choirs 5. The Carols for Choirs series was first published in 1961 (edited by David Willcocks & Reginald Jacques). The books have become a standard resource for both church and concert choirs, mixing traditional tunes, well-known harmonisations, and newer original carols. Carols for Choirs 5 was produced in 2011 for the 50th anniversary of the series and is edited by Bob Chilcott and David Blackwell. This collection with its mix of contemporary composers and accessible arrangements of traditional carols. merits further exploration and it was a delight therefore to see a number of carols from this volume featured in the concert.

Highlights included lovely expressive singing and excellent musical communication with the audience. Particular mention should be made of the mellifluous singing of the sopranos and altos in 'A Maiden Most Gentle' (with the flautist playing from the aisle), the expressiveness of the 'Nightingale Carol', and the unbridled jollity of the dancing lines of Owen's setting of The Holly and the Ivy.

The second half opened with several contrasted carols - from the wittiness of 'The Sparrows' Carol' (and a great part for the side drum), to the Choir's beautiful rendering of Rutter's 'Candlelight Carol' and 'Away in a Manger'. 'Still, Still, Still' – with its instrumental interludes - reflected the Choir's

ability to sing sensitively in often well-blended ensemble; this more than compensated for the rare inconsistencies in entries and endings. Indeed - this was a delightful and musical set of performances – and the audience participation in some of the traditional carols enabled us all to enjoy the experience of singing together with some 200 others.

But - we were not done yet. There was a surprise to come! Just when we thought it was home time, Conductor, David Burgess, demonstrated once again his skills in crowd facilitation with 'The Twelve Days of Christmas'. No one quite expected this – nor indeed, what then transpired to be such a unique rendering! While including the usual traditional gifts for each of the eleven days of the twelve, this also featured, for day five, five actual toilet rolls! (Never before have I encountered this singular version!). Dividing up the audience – and so energetically led by the conductor - each section was allocated a particular gift. And, those brave five people who decided to catch one of the actual toilet rolls projected at random into the audience, gained amazing confidence as the song progressed over its numerous iterations!

A good time was had by all!

Jane Bryant
December 2025