THREE SPIRES CONCERT REVIEW: VAUGHAN WILLIAM, RUTTER, BERNSTEIN, PARRY

After a run of concerts largely dominated by Bach, Mozart and Handel, it was good to see the Three Spires returning to more contemporary repertoire for their concert on July 6th. No commissions or works by living composers admittedly, but still an entire evening of 20th century music. And while this was not repertoire that would have devotees of the Avant Garde or experimentalist traditions rushing to buy tickets, it did provide an opportunity to hear mainstream works in rarely heard arrangements. In a break with the norm, the resident orchestra was whittled down to a chamber ensemble comprising flute, oboe, cello, harp, organ and percussion.

The Five Mystical Songs by Vaughan Williams is more often heard either with full orchestral or solo organ accompaniment, and this arrangement by the composer for harp, timpani and organ provided a fascinating perspective on an early work, traces of the first symphony bursting forth in the choral interjections and organ/percussion swells. Conductor James Anderson-Besant shaped the work with authority and had doubtless worked the singers hard to bring out the best they had to offer. Baritone Alex Bower-Brown provided a thoroughly convincing rendition with excellent projection and subtle interpretation. The organ sounded at once powerful and ethereal – set back behind and above the choir but surging forward and outward with each crescendo. Choir entries were judiciously placed, and if the lower voices did struggle at times with their high notes, the sound was generally secure and rewarding. The closing passages of ‘Love Bade Me Welcome’ proved especially moving (and apposite), with the choir remaining seated as they intoned ‘You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: So I did sit and eat.’

The evening’s first half concluded with a setting of the Requiem mass by John Rutter. Having heard the same group perform his Gloria a few years ago, I was expecting a similar diet of easy-listening. Instead, the work opens with dark, brooding bass lines carving out a climbing chromatic figure, not unlike the uncompromising opening of *Lutosławski’s*4th symphony and leading to a choir entry almost certainly modelled on Britten’s War Requiem. True, the more accessible Rutter style soon establishes itself, but the sugar is tempered by the harder edges of the pared down instrumental forces (the arrangement is the composer’s own). Excellent performances here from Barbara Degener (cello), James Robinson (tuned percussion), Gabriella dall’Olio (harp), Tamsin Robinson (oboe) and Karen Green (flute), while soprano soloist Katherine Gregory was magnificent, her voice balancing expressivity with clarity, projection and precision.

Audiences familiar with Leonard Bernstein’s popular Jazzy stage works like ‘On The Town’ or ‘West Side Story’, may not have anticipated the seriousness, rigour and challenges of the work that began the second half. Firstly, The Chichester Psalms are sung entirely in Hebrew, secondly, the harmonic language is taught, the part writing fiendishly difficult (especially for the male voices) and thirdly, the arrangement (Bernstein’s own) for harp, organ and percussion strips back his usual lavish colours to their bare essentials.

Though everyone clearly threw everything they had into this work, it was perhaps not quite ready for performance. Complex passages at times lacked a degree of rhythmic precision, causing the musical clarity to suffer. Male voices were underpowered, and the overall balance was very percussion heavy. Reservations aside, some memorable performances were heard here. Treble Joseph Hagley may have looked a little terrified at the outset but sang well and shows promise; Katherine Gregory was again on top form; Andrew Wyatt’s organ playing was exceptional and some fine harp playing from Gabriella dall’Olio brought tenderness and repose to the work.

By total contrast, the final offering of the evening was a romantic lightweight, Hubert Parry’s ‘Hear My Words, Ye People’. Stirring organ lines were brought into sharp relief by Andrew Wyatt, supporting some joyous singing from the whole choir, with added solos from baritone Alex Bower-Brown and the chamber soloists Sam Lyne-Hall (bass), Alex Davison (tenor), Celia Stoddart Hunkin (alto) and Katherine Gregory (soprano). But though convincingly performed, coming after the harmonic riches of the Vaughan Williams, the shimmering colours of the Rutter and the rhythmic intensity of the Bernstein, I think the programme would have been tighter and stronger without this piece. It sat somewhat out of context with the otherwise inventive programming, sending us on our way with a closing chorus that could have been lifted directly from the Victorian hymnal and a melody uncomfortably close to ‘Happy Birthday to You’.

The Three Spires’ next concert will be on 16th November, devoted entirely to Elgar’s Dream of Gerontius. The choir is still seeking more male voices and if you think you might be interested in joining, please email membersthreespires@googlemail.com.

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