**Three Spires Concert Saturday 8th July 2023: Bach Cantata no 80, *Ein Feste Burg*, Mozart *Clarinet Concerto* & Scarlatti *St Cecilia Mass***

While the Three Spires Singers have always striven to feature top class soloists, the concert on 8th July of works by Scarlatti, Mozart and Bach surpassed itself with a particular wealth of young talent: Jacob Perry performing the solo part in Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto, with Katherine Gregory, Hannah Dienes-Williams, Tom Lilburn, Louis Watkins and Simon Grant fronting the choir and orchestra for Scarlatti’s St Cecilia Mass and Bach’s Cantata no. 80, Ein Feste Burg.

Taking the podium for the first time, guest conductor Patrick Bailey steered the ship with clarity and authority. Though the programme had been decided in advance by Christopher Gray before his departure, Patrick embraced the repertoire with enthusiasm and vision both in performance and during the course of choir and orchestral rehearsals.

The concert opened with the Bach Cantata. At once Patrick stamped his mark on proceedings with some unorthodox performer choreography. After the choir’s opening chorus, bass soloist Simon Grant adopted his standard position to the front left of the conductor for the ensuing duet while soprano Katherine Gregory’s divine voice emerged unseen from behind the string section, her presence only revealed via the TV monitor. She then processed forward through the players for the recitative that followed.

Orchestral forces were stripped back for this work to chamber size, ably supported by basso continuo of solo cello (Danielle Jones) and chamber organ and harpsichord (Paul Comeau). Other chamber groupings followed: solo violin (leader Philip Montgomery-Smith) and oboe (Tamsin Robinson) joining alto Tom Lilburn and tenor Louis Watkins for the duet ‘Wie selig sind doch sie’. The choreography again worked its magic here - Tamsin somehow appearing at the leader’s side before slipping away again for the final chorale.

All singers gave strong performances in this piece, with well controlled phrasing, pristine vibrato and razor-sharp diction. The male alto occasionally struggled to balance the more penetrating tenor voice and the bass could not quite achieve the expressive levels of his fellow singers. The outstanding voice among the group, Katherine Gregory seemed totally attuned both to the Baroque style and to the acoustics and scale of the building. The choir took a moment to settle into the work, but easily cut through the reduced orchestral forces, though the difficult acoustic tended to leave them slightly behind the beat for much of the time, something that in the past Christopher Gray had largely managed to address.

Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto in A Major completed the first half of the evening. Soloist Jacob Perry gave an exceptional performance, his tone full and rounded, his entries perfectly controlled and his phrasing deeply considered and artfully rendered. Music, soloist, orchestra and space united here to produce a magical experience. Perry clearly took the utmost delight in live playing, his presence at times verging on the theatrical as his expressions captured every nuance of the music, both when playing and when awaiting his next entry. In response, the orchestra gave an assured performance of this no doubt tried, tested and much-loved work.

The concert’s second half was taken up with just one work, Alessandro Scarlatti’s little known St Cecilia Mass. This is arguably a somewhat problematic piece, with few opportunities for the choir to engage in any extended singing and little in the way of memorable material or dynamic contrast. Patrick Bailey managed nonetheless to bring a sense of excitement to the work by pushing the tempi changes and emphasising the shifts of texture. It also introduced us to the last of the soloists: second soprano Hannah Dienes-Williams. Her voice was characterful, though less powerful than that of fellow soprano Katherine Gregory, the balance therefore working better when she had the top line. Tom Lilburn’s alto voice sat much more comfortably within this work’s five-part voicing than within the four-part Bach; it worked especially well when set simply against cello. The first chance the choir had to shine came at the close of the Gloria with the ‘Cum Sancto Spiritu’. From here, the work passes through some intricate interchanges between the soloists in the Credo, leading to an angelic, beautifully sung choir Amen before the Sanctus. For many composers, the Sanctus, like the Gloria before it, is an opportunity to add weight and brilliance to a scoring of the mass. For Scarlatti, it becomes more a continued winding down towards the closing Agnus Dei, giving a quiet, considered close to the evening’s music-making.

Patrick Bailey now passes the baton over to new Musical Director James Anderson-Besant, who will present more Mozart and Bach over the coming months, the next Three Spires concert being on Saturday 18th November with Bach’s Magnificat and Mozart’s Horn Concerto and Requiem.

Chris Best 28/07/23

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