**Three Spires Singers and Orchestra perform**

**Prokofiev, Vaughan Williams, Elgar and Rutter**

On Saturday 6th April Truro cathedral played host to the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra performing a programme of exclusively 20th Century repertoire, under the assured direction of conductor Christopher Gray. The centrepieceof the evening was Sergei Prokofiev's third piano concerto, a gripping work for the audience and a fiendishly difficult one for the performers, with its frenetic piano gestures and complex, interweaving orchestral counterpart. Chris Gray's tempi were spot on for balancing both excitement and clarity, while soloist Cordelia Williams'skill at the piano was simply breathtaking. Having the keyboard visible via the TV screens was an inspired touch, allowing us to marvel as her *glissandi* flowed up and down the piano like water. If at times a shortage of cellos left the string section somewhat bass-light, the orchestra nonetheless rose to the challenges pitched to it by the pianist and responded with great gusto.

The Prokofiev was preceded by Elgar's short choral work ***Great is the Lord***, for which chorus and orchestra were joined by baritone Jaivin Raj. Raj gave a measured and thoughtful performance, which helped propel the work towards its uplifting conclusion.

The evening's second half opened with Vaughan Williams’ ***Towards the Unknown Region*,** a setting oftext by American poet Walt Whitman. Whitman's is a wholly agnostic view of death, the moment seen as one of pure mystery, and had Vaughan Williams set these words later in life one might imagine him employing a more mystical or tortuous musical language (as in his *Sinfonia Antarctica*, his *Job***,** *a Mask for Dancing*, or in his *4th Symphony*). As it stands, the setting seems to build more towards an affirmation of religious faith. Part of the challenge in performance therefore is to bring out those qualities of awe and wonder from the score. In this respect, both choir and orchestra at first seemed in need of greater direction, but the music soon came together, the lines more clearly drawn and the shape well defined.

A second Vaughan Williams piece, his ***English Folksongs Suite***, provided the other purely orchestral item of the evening. Gordon Jacob's orchestral arrangement of this composition for brass band was colourfully played, with excellent solos from oboist Tamsin Robinson and lead violinist Nick Whiting.

It is a noteworthy and unusual feature of Three Spires concerts that the programme text never shies away from critical scrutiny of the music being showcased. For this concert, we were told that opinion surrounding John Rutter's ***Gloria*** varied widely among the performers. But whatever their individual tastes, the whole ensemble rallied together to give a powerful and committed performance of the work, with brass and percussion sections truly excelling themselves.

The second movement opens with an organ themethat all but quotesthe Offertorium of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*; here enjoying the sensitive touch of organist Joseph Wicks. Further echoes of Britten's seminal work (this time of the Dies Irae) are heard as male voices enter with 'Domine Deus, rex coelestis'. The movement closes in ethereal mood, setting slow choir against shimmering solo soprano and alto lines, Katherine Gregory and Lowenna Wearne really taking these to heart with fine tone and expression.

The 1st movement's theme re-appears in a new guise for the 'Quoniam tu solus sanctus', after which the music inexorably works its way back to the opening fanfares.

To return to the programme note for a moment; its writer closes with the observation that Rutter has a particularly strong following across the Atlantic. Indeed, on hearing the Gloria,I could not help but think of the popular film scores of John Williams (Star Wars, Superman, HarryPotter, etc) or Howard Shore (Lord of the Rings). And thanks to UK radio stations such as Classic FM promoting the easy-listening end of the classical repertoire, Rutter's star has probably never shone more brightly. By siting him alongside British composers of an earlier generation, this concert helps put his current popularity into historical and stylistic context.

**Chris Best**

**19/5/19**