



THE HARLOW LEISUREZONE Sunday 11 July 2010

In heat-wave temperatures the Harlow Chorus rounded off a stunning season by bringing a basket of ancient and modern delights to the brand new Harlow Leisurezone

In a programme that included Bob Chilcott's "Songs and Cries of London Town," Jonathan Dove's "The Passing of the Year" (a four seasons collection of much-loved verse) and the universally popular "Carmina Burana", the cut glass clarity of diction and delivery that this chorus achieved remains the abiding memory.

Harlow Chorus was joined by the excellent Essex Young Singers & Essex Training Choir plus, for Carmina Burana, Harlow Chorus' training choir, the Academy.

Throughout the concert Susan Graham Smith and Daniel Hill on piano and the Malcolm Ball percussion ensemble provided a rich, thoughtful and imaginative support. It is hard now to think that "Carmina Burana" should sound any other way.

The afternoon opened with "Songs and Cries of London Town", of some poignance to a town that was largely born of migrating Londoners just a few generations ago. Of this set the chorus seemed to most relish William Dunbar's "The Flowers of Cities All" and Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge". Both poems have a natural rhythm that grows out of the lines. In the Dunbar, the Chorus mimic the restless movement of the Thames and in the Wordsworth they caressed the wonderful choral colouring of Chilcott's setting. With language used this well it would be (and so often is) a sin not to hear every word. Not a problem with this performance or with any of the afternoon's offerings.

Jonathan Dove is one of the less frightening contemporary composers. That is not to say that his work is not challenging to performer and listener alike; but the music does grow out of its subject matter. His musical language celebrates the word and the spirit of his text, nowhere more winningly than in "The Passing of the Year". This has some wonderfully effective partnerships between chorus and instrumentalists. Emily Dickinson's "Answer July" was a shimmering summer's day and the lilting dirge of Thomas Nashe's "Adieu, farewell earth's bliss" produced some of the finest singing of the concert drawing all the earthy colour of the piece. In the last setting, "Ring out wild bells" by Tennyson, the chorus were perhaps moving furthest from their comfort zone; but they seemed to relish it.

The major work, Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana" is a lusty celebration of wine, women, song, dance and the spring. As is inevitable in music of great quality, tenderness and humour can be lost in a work that has become so familiar, so used and abused. This performance above all other achievements brought to the work a newly minted freshness. We heard for the first time in this intimidatingly vast space a volume of sound that did the work and the arena justice. Latin seemed the first language of the chorus so clear were they in every line and nuance of the work.

In the Carl Orff, three soloists of outstanding quality helped raise the whole enterprise to a level of the very finest oratorio singing. James Huw Jeffries made a convincingly alarmed swan on the barbie. Paul Carey Jones was in tremendous form filling his arias with strength, sweetness and, when needed, a range of octaves that would test a trio. But the memory that will linger longest was the joyous sound that Sally Harrison made in the roof-raising but achingly lovely "Dulcissime": "Sweetest one ! Ah! I give myself to you totally". I doubt, however long it stands, that the Leisurezone will ever hear a louder, sweeter sound. Or a more irresistible promise made on a hot summer's day. Sally is a Harlow resident so audiences may soon be hearing more of her.

Finally, to acknowledge the main responsibility for all these virtues: since the passing of the baton to Alexander Chaplin this choir demonstrates a more obvious confidence, which is often the only difference between a fine and the finest level of performance. Alexander is a tremendous communicator either with the magic wand or with the microphone. He is good news for Harlow.

I am already excited at the prospect of the Monteverdi Vespers at Ely Cathedral, 7.30. Saturday 13 November 2010.

David Batterbee

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As a separate issue I would make the following comments on this space as a concert venue. I thought the hall visually distracting with the upper galleries showing a steady flow of understandably intrigued citizens. That apart, the acoustic was a little dry and it's a big space to fill. There was a noticeable decay at the end of high register passages. This seemed to add a ringing fade to the end of the Carl Orff choruses and was quite powerful. The three soloists were exceptional and had no problem reaching the back of the hall. D.B.