



DIXIT DOMINUS COGGESHALL November 2011

On Saturday evening, in one of East Anglia's finest churches, Harlow Chorus gave a concert of luminous Baroque works the programme of which was so well devised, as to serve as a model for others. Each of the four composers' works made the most of the considerable talents assembled and gave each a chance to demonstrate their solo and ensemble skills. Harlow Chorus were joined by members of The London Productions Orchestra and five highly talented young singers from The Royal Academy of Music: Aoife Miskelly and Sofia Larsson sopranos, Kathryn Walker alto, Ian Milne tenor and David Shipley bass.

The evening started with three jewel like Monteverdi motets. The first, Cantate Domino, was as fine an opening to an evening of Baroque church music as you could wish. A gentle dancing entry by the strings and an especially fine warmth of bass singing, prefaced a sparkling chandelier of choral invention. In both the this and the second motet, *Christe, adoramus te*, the choir demonstrated their ability to achieve the essential demand of this repertoire; the ability to articulate each component of the vocal tapestry with crystal clarity, yet hold the choral blend and complex rhythms. For the third Monteverdi motet, *Beatus vir*, the Chorus were joined by the soloists. The finale in particular, called for the two soprano soloists to rise through and above the chorus, already in top gear, to fill our hearts with wonder.

Next were three rarely heard motets from the least renowned of the composers on call Heinrich Schutz. These works called for the five soloists to combine without the chorus. For this reviewer these fine young singers and these three magical motets provided the abiding joy and memory of the evening. The motets themselves were each so simple, so complex and so satisfyingly complete as to represent a DNA of mixed voice singing. The soloists, individually and collectively sang with great quality, great involvement and with, for their ages, astonishing projection. These motets became an interlude of vocal theatre that sat perfectly poised in the larger musical offerings of the evening.

The first half finished with Dieterich Buxtehude's Magnificat, though, as Alexander Chaplin explained in his introduction, it is doubtful that it is by that composer. As Alex said, it didn't matter. The Magnificat sat perfectly as a finale to the first half calling for the combined forces assembled to interweave and exchange joyous musical invention. The elegance of the fine musicians of The London Productions Orchestra was allowed to showcase in some instrumental interludes and the chorus and soloists combined to stirring effect.

The second half of the concert was devoted to one of the most popular and demanding of Handel's choral works, *Dixit Dominus*. If it were the basses who caught the ear from the chorus in the first half, then it is the sopranos who are required to burnish the brilliance of Handel's masterpiece. On Saturday evening the sopranos of the Harlow Chorus were more than equal to what was asked. They were simply outstanding, either holding long sinuous lines of spinal sound or racking up the volume when needed and at all times maintaining a beauty of tone.

Dixit Dominus is set in eight movements that seem to embrace almost every compositional device that Handel had developed by that time. Dramatic use of long silences with the thrilling re-entry of the chorus, moments of primal power in the urgency of some of the text, settings very modern even to our ears today and examples of breathtaking stillness and almost operatic solo settings. Even the use of chants that draw from the past point to the future and the cantatas of Carl Orff . With what had gone before in the first half, the Orchestra, the Chorus and the soloists had by now warmed to the acoustics of St. Peter ad Vincula and to the strengths of each other, to sound as if they had been singing and playing together for years.

This is, in no small part, also testament to the skills of Alexander Chaplin. I started this review by celebrating the art of programming concerts and its value became self evident on Saturday evening, when the first half of the concert seemed to prepare both artists and audience to better perform and enjoy what followed.

Apart from acknowledging the quality of St Peter ad Vincula as a concert space and to commend the way it was presented for Saturday's event I would like to make one more special mention. We heard fine music making from everyone concerned but I thought the singing of the bass David Shipley was outstanding and promises an equally outstanding future for him. Along with the joyous discovery of the Schutz motets, the surprising richness and power that came from David Shipley's slight frame will long endure and I hope both will bring pleasure in the future.

David Batterbee November 13 2011