



HARLOW CHORUS: FEEL THE SPIRIT

This performance by the excellent Harlow Chorus was dubbed "new frontiers in sacred music". With this Star Trek-esque promise, the audience was ready for what had been tipped to be a truly stunning show. Let me tell you: we were not disappointed! The choir was on form and soloist Melanie Marshall has the distinction of not only having performed the world premier of John Rutter's *Feel the Spirit* but had, in fact, had it written especially for her.

The first half of the performance opened with some masterful reworkings of well-known sacred texts, including *The Lord is my Shepherd* from "The Vicar of Dibley" fame. The soprano solo in this was taken by the choir's own Vicky Calver, who, despite obvious nerves, sang smoothly and beautifully.

Stanford's *Three Motets* were a real highlight of the first half. Conductor Alex Chaplin enthused about the composer's work, describing it as "word painting", and it was not hard to see why. Harlow Chorus's voices were in fine balance, the notes quivering and hanging in the air for *Beati quorum via*, filling the space rather splendidly. Suddenly, the audience - and choir! - was shaken from its happy spring-music reverie with Spicer's *O praise God*. This piece was immediately striking with its unusual and ever-changing time signature, fascinating harmonies and evolving tone, from soft and melodic to march-like. The chorus worked very hard in mastering this challenging arrangement and they were hugely rewarded: a truly fabulous performance that really showed off the talent of both Alex Chaplin and the Harlow Chorus singers.

After the interval, we were to be treated to Rutter's *Feel the Spirit*, which opened with the toe-tappingly exciting *Joshua fit the battle of Jericho*: the men started this with strong, confident voices, setting the tone of the piece perfectly. It was then time for *Steal away*. Melanie Marshall levelled her gaze at the audience and we were immediately captured. She sang the piece with a gorgeous sincerity that kept every person in the church mesmerised: it was as though she addressed each of us individually.

Marshall clearly enjoyed performing *Ev'ry time I feel the spirit*, as did the choir. Gone was the well-mannered choral group: here instead we had a gospel group that swayed with the beat and smiled through all the songs! The resultant change in sound and mood affected the audience hugely: as I looked around, there was a smile on every face.

The whole concert was rounded off in a suitably lively manner with *When the saints go marching in*. The tenors performed splendidly and strongly and the choir as a whole gave an enjoyable, believable performance. At the end, the audience was asked to stand and join in singing the final chorus. "That way," explained Alex Chaplin, "we'll have a standing ovation."

For anybody who has not yet had the opportunity to see Harlow Chorus perform, I urge you to buy tickets! You are in for a treat - this choir consistently performs to a high standard and feature some of Britain's brightest rising stars in choral music.

Katy Bagshaw - 09 May 2010

