

An Evening of Russian Music

In they clattered – handbags or programmes in one hand, cushions from home in the other. Vivace Chorus's supporters are clearly well-practiced in their concert going rituals at Guildford Cathedral. These folks have nouse. Had the programme nailed me to the chair I might have felt a hair shirt moment coming on – the cathedral's chairs are designed for the truly devout – but as it was, this programme of Russian music had plenty to keep feet tapping and pins and needles at bay.

And what a following; the place was packed. The Russian programme presented by this 120-strong chorus proved a popular choice. Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances* launched the first half, followed by the rarely heard choral version of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. Some perfectly placed consonants in the *1812* proved this to be a polished performance. The thunderous gunfire was particularly effective in the battlefield cathedral acoustic; unfortunately the string writing in the Borodin had not fared quite so well in that cavernous space, coming across as muddied, with a slight delay at times between chorus and orchestra.

It was Prokofiev's *Ivan the Terrible* where the spotlight came to rest in the second half. Prokofiev's *Ivan*, banned by Soviet authorities due to its complex characterisation of the Russian hero, provided some intense moments for the two soloists from the opera course at the Royal Academy of Music and for the chorus.

A deeply moving solo by the young, poised mezzo-soprano Natalia Brzezinska, 'Ocean Sea, Russian Sea', revealed a treat of a voice with chestnut tones. She was admirably backed by the murmuring chorus. We had the pleasure of hearing her again in a second solo, 'The Song of the Beaver' in which Brzezinska employed darker tones to emphasise the sinister edge to this seemingly innocent hunting story.

Vivace are capable of both a great delicacy of colour and a great show of strength. Adjectives to describe the wordless chorus of benediction in 'Ivan's Sickness', might be, say, 'sweet', 'sublime', 'dulcet', but I'm going to go with 'mellifluous'.

The baritone's drinking song in 'The Banquet' gave us an opportunity at the last to hear the surprisingly big baritone voice of Lithuanian Vytautas Vepstas, backed by the men's humming chorus, who were a little too tentative at first, but with conductor Jeremy Backhouse's firm lead, soon found the right level to project over the orchestra.

'The Storming of Kazan' afforded another memorable moment in which male voices are answered by female, marred very slightly by Vivace's only real problem – a lack of men. There are about double the number of women to men, and although the men, tenors in particular, clearly do sterling work, at times the imbalance showed.

This is a chorus well worth hearing. Better still, if you're a tenor or a baritone, why not join? What's the matter with all you chaps out there? Don't you like having fun? The chorus rehearses on Monday evenings in central Guildford – what better way to start the week than with a good sing.
Email: membership@VivaceChorus.org

This time next year Vivace Chorus is singing in Mahler's Symphony No.8 at the Royal Albert Hall. This is a tour-de-force of the orchestral world, with its huge orchestra, eight soloists, two large choruses and a children's choir. Put 15th May 2011 in your diaries as a date not to be missed.

Rachel Musgrove