

Review of "Bach Mass in B minor", 15th Nov 2014

Bach's *Mass in B minor* presents plenty of questions for those that research and perform this great work; such as why did Bach compile some of his greatest works and revise them (some more considerably than others) to set a complete Roman Catholic Mass when he worked within a Protestant-Lutheran church? I wonder if such a work is a statement of the universality of not only the Christian faith but all faith. It is a work of immense symmetry, beauty and power and Jeremy Backhouse brought these important elements alive with the Vivace Chorus' performance on Saturday 15 November at Guildford Cathedral.

It can be a difficult acoustic to navigate at Guildford Cathedral but the chorus, orchestra and soloists were balanced with aplomb. The opening *Kyrie* was shaped with care, and the central duet was sung with obvious delight by sopranos Alice Privett and Alys Roberts. The trumpets cut across the ensemble beautifully in the *Gloria*, and the chorus coped well with the long lines and extended runs. What was most noticeable was the clarity of the diction and the carefully graded dynamics that helped to bring a sense of direction throughout the *Gloria*. *Laudemus te* was at an enjoyable tempo, and we were treated to a precise and articulate '*Gratias agimus tibi*'. I particularly enjoyed the duet between the soprano and tenor Alice Privett and Richard Dowling; their voices blended well in a stylish account of *Domine Deus*. The later *Qui Sedes* was bravely approached by the countertenor Damian Glanclarski and perhaps he worked a bit too hard for the dance to really come across. The bass aria could have been projected even more but was nonetheless a pleasing performance by Lancelot Nomura.

The second half started with a wonderfully firm account of the *Credo*; no ambiguity here over the creed. The opening two choral movements were energetic with rhythmic vitality. The duet was equally rich with rhythmic vitality and clear text, shaped diligently throughout by the soloists and Jeremy Backhouse. *Et incarnatus est* and the powerful *Crucifixus* that followed were controlled with care and paced with a sense of the tortured harmonies. The chorus excelled here, in the centre of the Mass. *Et resurrexit* was bravely sung, with its equally tortuous fast runs. The second bass aria *Et in Spiritum Sanctum* was sung effortlessly by Samuel Queen with the obbligato oboes d'amore parts adding a fitting plangent colour.

We were treated to such warmth in the *Sanctus* and the chorus sopranos in particular gave such precision in their triplets. The *Osanna* was triumphant and displayed how well the Vivace Chorus can manage the demands of two-choir singing. The two solos (*Benedictus, Agnus Dei*) were two poignant and expressive moments following the intensity Backhouse achieved in the previous choral movements. Tenor Richard Dowling and countertenor Damian Ganclarski sang with a warm tone, and stylish phrasing. The flute solo was particularly impressive here. The final *Dona nobis pacem* showed all that make the Vivace Chorus such an enjoyable choir to hear; there was a sense of enjoyment on everyone's face, commitment singing through the chorus and they surprised us all with a strong firm sound until the very last note.

Bravo to the Chorus, soloists, Brandenburg Sinfonia and particularly to Jeremy Backhouse. It was clearly a labour of love for Bach to compile this complex work and

that love was evident in Jeremy's strong leadership to bring together an enjoyable evening of an important, great work of the choral repertoire.

Dr Steven Berryman

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