

By general consensus this year's Three Choirs Festival at Worcester proved to be one of the most uplifting ever, in terms of inspiration, planning, presentation and the gratifyingly high artistic standards maintained throughout the week.

The world's oldest festival, dating back to the early 1700s, was long seen as the doyen of musical events. In the final years of last century, there was a mindless tendency to class it on the periphery of British music-making, fixed in its ways and lacking in relevance.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In terms of organisation and administration, programming, commissioning, youth involvement, box office, front of house, its sheer range of events and above all, the musical excellence associated with the outstanding Philharmonia Orchestra, now linked to it by a formal residency, the Three Choirs has proved itself a match for anything outside London.

With the three cathedral choirs all currently flying high, and three scrupulously well-prepared choral societies, it has the means to deliver a week of music, talks and lectures of a very high order. And this year, with a revival of the impressively scripted and acted play *Elgar and Alice*, by Peter Sutton, staged before a full house at the Swan Theatre, it showed that high-quality drama is also a part of its remit.

This summer's events were also something of a farewell, for this festival – arguably the best he has designed and led - was also the last to be directed by Adrian Lucas, who after 15 years at the helm leaves Worcester Cathedral in the New Year to pursue a freelance performing and conducting career and develop his own recording company, Acclaim Productions.

Lucas conducted some of the most resoundingly successful events, including a *Dream of Gerontius* at the outset which revealed a chorus, both demonic and angelic, on top form – well defined in exposed leads and electrifying in Elgar's major set pieces. Sarah Connolly's angel seemed more consolatory than ever, producing at times a scintillating *pianissimo* that sent a *frisson* down the spine Alan Opie was magnificently robust and articulate in the bass roles. In the first part the immensely gifted John Graham-Hall, as Gerontius, seemed perhaps too operatic: there was a glaring anger that sometimes stood at odds with Cardinal Newman's words: one sensed a marked improvement latterly, for beside the intensity, he is a profoundly expressive performer.

Of the concerts focused on Early Music, that by the three Cathedral Choirs and The Academy of Ancient Music, also conducted by Lucas, started with the sizzling *Te Deum* by Charpentier, in which vibrant trumpet playing, various details of Purcellian hue, various ensembles and an exquisite solo by Lucy Bowen with baroque flute were among the high points. Handel's *Dixit Dominus* sounded as vital as any I can recall, thrillingly paced from the outset, thrusting choruses, another striking Bowen solo ('*Tecum principatus*') and a stylish boys' launch to '*Judicabit in nationibus*'. The extraordinary, redemptive '*De torrente*', sounding a bit like 'Winter' from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, with twin sopranos, yielded one of the most agreeable and subtle chorus moments of the entire week.

Other concerts spanned a wealth of sacred music. The Eton Choral Course, founded by Ralph Allwood, has now passed to his successor Tim Johnson, who at Tewkesbury Abbey showed himself to be a conductor of finesse who inspires spirit, fine tuning and precision among his charges. Weelkes's *Hosanna to the Son of David* (admirably delivered here) may not match Gibbons's setting, but Tomkins's aching *When David heard*, sung with real feeling, effortlessly outshines Weelkes's fine version. Tomkins was, of course, organist of Worcester during the Civil War, and saw his cathedral organ vengefully destroyed. He would be thrilled to hear the recently installed four-manual Kenneth Tickell organ, which lent variety and elegance to Choral Evensongs throughout the week.

An earlier Tewkesbury Concert, by the choir of Royal Holloway College, promised well with a superb programme of Philips, Bull and Dering, all of whom served abroad in the Low Countries. This is continental-influenced music of great brightness and vitality. Somehow this brave, imaginative programme felt rather subdued, and despite some superb antiphonal polyphony in eight parts (notably Philips's *Beati estis* and a resplendent final *Hodie nobis de caelo*), never mastered the acoustic as well as the lucid Eton choir, whose almost unknown Howells piece, *I love all beauteous things*, proved an unexpected gem.

Youth excelled elsewhere: the Worcester and Gloucester Junior Choirs performed, together and separately, a programme of energising music by Bob Chilcott, John Rutter and Richard Rodney Bennett (who appeared in person earlier in the week for his stylish programme of Irving Berlin, and was also represented by his cheerful youth opera *All the King's Men*). The National Youth Orchestra of Scotland not only proved what a first-rate symphonist their fellow-Scot James MacMillan is, to be ranked among the outstanding composers of today; but preceded his Third Symphony 'Silence', with four *Wayfaring Songs* by Mahler that were a model of orchestral detail and subtle colouring. Jane Irwin was the fabulous soprano soloist whose rendering made the nerve ends tingle.

Song always has a place. The baritone William Dazeley offered a morning recital packed with variety, from Somervell's *A Shropshire Lad* to two sets of delicious Samuel Barber songs and many lighter offerings, before appearing as an impassioned soloist in Geraint Bowen's hauntingly beautiful, emotionally searing performance of Brahms's Requiem, which highlighted, not least, a Schumann underlay (Bowen's performance of Schumann's *Das Paradies und die Peri* at recent Hereford Festival was one of the most imaginative of all recent undertakings; next year, equally boldly, he has programmed Dyson's *The Canterbury Pilgrims*).

The opening work in the Brahms concert was a real rarity, Vaughan Williams's *An Oxford Elegy*. This work hinges on the quality of the narration, and here the Very Revd. Peter Atkinson, Dean of Worcester, showed skill and acumen worthy of a seasoned actor. His beautiful, apt and lulling delivery and Bowen's delicate shaping married with the Philharmonia's sensitive solo touches and a wordless chorus to produce a memorable, nicely understated, finessed performance of this work premiered, interestingly, at The Queen's College, Oxford in 1951 by the adventurous Eglesfield Musical Society under Bernard Rose.

The Sixteen appeared in a varied programme. 'Illumination and Contemplation' highlighting more recent links between the orthodox and western traditions, in which two impassioned works by Rachmaninov's contemporary Pavel Chesnokov (1877-1944) and the devastatingly beautiful *A Child's Prayer* by James MacMillan, written as a response to the Dunblane massacre and featuring two entrancing soprano soloists, seemed the most involving pieces alongside two items from the Czech Petr Eben's organ sequence *Landscapes of Patmos*, played by Matthew Martin.

Arguably more affecting was a concert of secular items, sung by the Oxford-based choir Musica Beata under a capable young conductor, Tom Hammond-Davies, who has connections with Hertford, Magdalen and now New College. There was a buoyancy and uplift in their presentation, and involvement and a canny musical awareness, that made everything they sang sparkle. They excelled in a bizarre but gripping polyphonic creation, *On the Operation of the Sun*, by the choir's co-founder, Nicholas Brown. Moeran's *Songs of springtime* and part songs by Stanford and Elgar showcased the rhythmic flair and stylish musicianship of accurate-tuned of upper and lower voices alike

In a memorial tribute to the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the United States, Gloucester's Adrian Partington introduced the intensely moving tribute *On the Transmigration of Souls* by American composer John Adams, in which a tape reciting the names of those who died plays a haunting central role. Mozart's Requiem sat a little uneasily with this programme, but benefited from a gorgeous soprano soloist, Julia Doyle, and a fine bass, Robert Macdonald. The chorus was superb in both works, and Partington's prodigious gifts as a choral conductor were as evident here as in his later reading of Beethoven's Mass in C, in which he elicited from the Three Choirs Youth Choir a performance of professional standards, not least in the prolonged Credo, where the girls' singing at the 'Crucifixus' was out of this world. American violinist Tai Murray's heart-warming reading of Bruch's Violin Concerto lent added riches to this concert.

The opening service included Andrew Carter's tender setting of St. Francis of Assisi's words, 'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace'; while new music heard at the festival included *Quam dilecta!*, an anthem setting the ASB version of Psalm 84 by Lucas's distinguished predecessor, Donald Hunt; *Songs and Dances*, a three-part cello piece by Cheryl Frances-Hoad; *Still in Remembrance*, a rather long anthem including assorted passages from *Lamentations*, *Revelation*, Blake and Cardinal Newman by the Eastern-influenced, Alabama-born American composer Jackson Hill; and *A Worcestershire Song Cycle* by composer-pianist Ian King, a vibrant travelogue of poetry embracing Bewdley, Malvern, Leigh Sinton and other treasured county landmarks.

Two concerts stood out from this fine programme. One was Elgar's *Caractacus*, a magnificent choice by Lucas (with sentimental links to the Malvern Hills), which was conducted with flair by Sir Andrew Davis. Under him the orchestra's playing, not least brass and touches of woodwind, was a constant revelation; but while the music highlighted many facets of the mature Elgar, the narrative and slightly vapid love interest of H. A. Acworth's libretto seemed thin on dramatic tension. Peter Savidge in the title role sang terrifically; yet one sensed Elgar's earlier saga *King Olaf* has the clear edge in momentum and urgency.

The undoubted climax of the Worcester week came early, with the Philharmonia's magnificent playing of Mahler's Third Symphony. This impassioned outpouring, which, the composer said, 'begins with inanimate nature and ascends to the love of God', brought to the Three Choirs for the first time the Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki, whose sensational presence and masterly, economical control set the tone for the whole festival. The work was an enraptured hymn to life, with the mezzo-soprano Catherine Wyn-Rogers thrilling in the Nietzsche setting '*O Mensch! Gib Acht!*' ('Man, take heed!'), and the female chorus (plus bell-like boys) outstanding. If the first movement felt subterranean and elemental, the finale, like a massive passacaglia, was thrillingly redemptive. This monumental performance surely equalled anything heard hitherto at the festival, and supplied a glorious measure of the Three Choirs' value and standing.

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