



An Exciting Evening in Wells Cathedral

A large audience gathered in Wells Cathedral last Saturday evening for a concert by the Cathedral Oratorio Society under the expert direction of Matthew Owens. Instead of a choral work, the programme began with the highly original Organ Concerto by Francis Poulenc.

The soloist was the cathedral's Assistant Organist, Jonathan Vaughan accompanied by the strings and timpani of the La Folia Orchestra. As soon as the opening sonorous baroque style chords rang out on the impressive instrument one was gripped. The various sections of the work were well contrasted. In particular, the more reflective passages impressed with the delicacy of approach of both soloist and orchestra alike. Mention should be made of the lovely viola solo and the warm tone of the cellos. The technically demanding passages for the soloist were dispatched with great confidence and the whole made a promising beginning to the evening.

There followed the Five Mystical Songs by Ralph Vaughan Williams for baritone and chorus.. These are settings of poems by the 17thc priest, George Herbert. A choice of accompaniment is available for this work and for this performance it was the version for strings and organ which was selected.

The outstanding soloist was Robert Davies who is in increasing demand both in the opera house and on the concert platform. His mellifluous phrasing and colouring of the texts made a great impression. The choir made its mark immediately with a confident opening, well-tuned and with clear diction demonstrating that their conductor continues to raise standards. Notable moments were the exquisite close of the first song and the point in the third where the choir supported the soloist wordlessly intoning the plainsong melody, "O Sacrum Convivium". The set was rounded off with the choir's spirited account of the final "Antiphon".

The final work of the evening was the much loved Requiem by Gabriel Faure. What we had heard in the first half led one to expect something special and one was not disappointed.(As with the Vaughan Williams, there are several options for the accompaniment. On this occasion it was provided by strings and organ with the addition of two French horns.) This was a beautifully paced and shaped performance. From the hushed opening of the Introit to the closing pages of the final In Paradisum the choir produced beautiful tone throughout with subtly graded dynamics. The baritone soloist again excelled. In particular, his entry in the Offertory was really magical. (The climax of the Sanctus was quite powerful with the horns adding their weight to the texture.) The Pie Jesu is probably the best known section of the work as it is often heard separately. It was here sung with affecting simplicity by Fergus Brown, Head Boy Chorister at the Cathedral. (The powerful climax of the Libera Me was the dynamic high point of the work.)

Perhaps the most ravishing moment of the performance came in the Agnus Dei at the change of key into the Lux Aeterna section. The restrained final section, In Paradisum, was quite ethereal in atmosphere.

Throughout, the La Folia Orchestra played with great conviction and sensitivity

After the last sounds had floated away in the vast acoustic of the magnificent building there was a long pause before anyone felt able to break the spell.

Once again, we have to thank Matthew Owens for masterminding such a memorable evening.

Brendan Sadler