



A thrilling evening of music-making

This year's spring concert, given last Saturday by the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society under their conductor, Matthew Owens, was a demanding programme comprising two popular and exuberant 20th century choral works. Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms and Carl Orff's cantata, Carmina Burana.

The programme also included Samuel Barber's famous Adagio in an arrangement for organ. The choir was joined by the Cathedral Choristers and Vicars Choral.

The evening began magically as the opening phrase of the Adagio stole from the organ loft out of the silence. The piece originally formed the slow movement of Barber's first string quartet and achieved popularity in the composer's own arrangement for string orchestra. More recently it has become attractive to choirs in a choral transcription. I have to confess to thinking it would not adapt well for organ but was proved wrong by the soloist, Catherine Lamb, a young player who is acting sub-organist at the cathedral and also rehearsal pianist to the Oratorio Society. With apt registration she delineated the various strands of the piece and brought it to a sonorous climax.

The Chichester Psalms were given in a version with an accompaniment for organ, harp and percussion (provided by the Blandiver Ensemble) and one did miss the body of sound which a full orchestra provides. After a somewhat tentative start by the male voices, the choir rose to the challenge set by Bernstein's use of irregular time signatures, syncopation and, not least, by having to grapple with the Hebrew text. The women's sections in particular produced a warm ringing tone throughout. In the setting of Psalm 23 the boy alto soloist was Jacob Coton whose clear delivery from the pulpit was matched by sweetness of tone. Jacob was sensitively accompanied in this section by the excellent harpist Katie Flanagan.

The main work of the evening was Orff's life-affirming Carmina Burana. The many strongly rhythmic passages of the score were delivered with spirited attack. The round dance movement was particularly exciting. The rich-voiced baritone, who had the lion's share of the solos, was Giles Underwood. He was excellent in all that he did. Whether it was welcoming spring in lyrical vein or portraying the drunken abbot, his attention to the text was exemplary. As the swan was being roasted on a spit, counter tenor Stephen Wallace entered into the spirit of the piece writhing and mopping his brow to comic effect.

Soprano Katy Tansy filled the cathedral with a generous, warm sound. Her rendering of "*In truitina*" was most touching and her final phrase "*Dulcissima, totum tibi subdo me*" really produced the tingle factor.

The conductor, Matthew Owens, is to be congratulated for steering his forces through these challenging pieces with great clarity of direction and sensitivity of interpretation.

This was a thrilling evening of music-making as was confirmed by the sustained applause of a satisfied audience.

Brendan Sadler