



An overwhelming and moving experience

The music of Benjamin Britten is not everyone's cup of tea, so it was heartening to see a large audience in Wells Cathedral for a performance of one of his greatest works, the War Requiem.

It is a demanding piece and it received a fine performance by the Oratorio Society and the Cathedral Choristers, together with the La Folia Orchestra and a team of internationally renowned soloists, under the baton of their splendid conductor, Matthew Owens.

The chorus acquitted themselves well coping admirably with Britten's complex score with its tricky time signatures and use of syncopation. They produced some lovely sounds in the quieter passages such as the opening *Requiem Aeternam*, the *Lacrimosa* section of the *Dies Irae* and the hushed close of the work. At the other extreme, they delivered plenty of power when called for.

The climax of the *Tremens factus* section of the *Libera Me* was delivered with real force.

A feature of the score is the use of "off stage" choristers. At the time the work was written they would all have been boys but on this occasion the girl members were included. They sang impeccably and added a sense of the ethereal to the performance.

The La Folia Orchestra did sterling work. The greatly enlarged brass section contributed much to the excitement of the occasion, particularly in the *Dies irae*, if not always entirely in tune. There was also some sensitive playing from the wood wind and string sections.

A unique feature of the work is the juxtaposition with the Latin text of settings of poems by Wilfred Owen. These were sung by tenor, James Gilchrist and bass, Neal Davies.

Both were excellent with superb diction and a real understanding of the text.

For example, in the first poem James Gilchrist responded to the anger implicit in the words to dramatic effect without resorting to "barking". He also sang with great sensitivity when called for; the words "*Dona nobis pacem*" in the *Dies irae* were hauntingly floated. Neal Davies responded likewise and produced some finely graded singing and, when required, considerable power, without sacrificing quality of tone.

In the setting of "Strange Meeting" in the *Libera Me*, his uttering of the words "I am the enemy you killed, my friend" was sung with heart stopping emotion.

The soprano, Janice Watson, sang with conviction and really rose to the occasion in the *Libera Me* producing some thrilling sounds over the chorus and orchestra.

In a work as complex and challenging as this it is expected that there will be imperfections in balance and ensemble, especially given the difficult acoustics of the cathedral. Matthew Owens is to be congratulated in ensuring that these were minimal and in no way detracted from an overwhelming and moving experience. This was a considerable achievement of which he can be proud.

Brendan Sadler