

Somerset Chamber Choir

Far Beyond the Stars

A century of great British choral music

Sunday 6th January, King's College Chapel, Taunton

Review

Somerset Chamber Choir, conductor Graham Caldbeck, presented an entertainingly diverse programme of choral music by 20th century British composers at King's College Chapel, Taunton last Sunday (6th January) to a 500-strong audience. This is a choir that consistently attracts a large audience to its annual post-Christmas concert in Taunton and for very good reasons. Among these is its constant ability to find a programme that has a balance of challenges for its singers to respond to but also confronts its audience with the less familiar alongside more easily recognizable fare.

The danger when a choir has to negotiate 12 concert pieces with little respite and following a morning's rehearsal is that focus and energy will gradually slide. Faced with the prospect of singing the musically demanding pieces of John Rutter's *Hymn to the Creator of Light* and William Walton's *The Twelve* as the last two pieces, Graham Caldbeck really laid down a huge gauntlet for his singers. His confidence was well rewarded by a massive surge of energy and commitment, especially in the Walton.

The tenors and basses of the choir were in very good form showing an ability to produce an exemplary sustained and warm lyrical sound at the correct moments - *Like as the hart* by Herbert Howells immediately comes to mind. They knew technically how to give weight and punch without losing tonal quality to Elgar's *Give unto the Lord* and demonstrated how to sing the text with due regard for stress and articulation as for example in Parry's *My soul, there is a country*.

Among the soloists from the choir, John Broad's velvet and even-toned bass sound was effective in Vaughan William's *Lord, thou hast been our refuge*, a piece that unfortunately suffered chorally from some rhythmic uncertainty and tuning faults.

On this concert-occasion the sopranos and altos often lacked tonal brilliance and dynamic clout when it was needed and failed to stamp their presence sufficiently in moments of full power. In presenting so many pieces there was bound to be varying levels of success but, among others, *Valiant-for-Truth* by Vaughan Williams and Holst's *This have I done* scored well.

Richard Pearce was once again the choir's first-rate accompanist and as soloist in Stanford's *Toccata in D minor* and Mathias' *Toccata Giocosa* we were treated to some very accomplished playing despite the uphill articulation challenges in the Stanford's *Toccata* on the King's tracker-action organ.

The Somerset Chamber Choir are to be congratulated on their marketing, organisation and presentation of this concert with a particularly well-produced programme with texts of all items and informative notes written by the conductor.

Andrew Maddocks