

SUMMER CONCERT 2018 REVIEW

Thurrock Choral Society's Summer Concert, given at Thameside Primary School, Grays, on Sunday 8th July, was a concert with a difference. Rather than programming one, two or three substantial choral scores, the Society presented a variety of shorter pieces in differing musical styles, with something of a seasonal flavour –and the approach worked well.

As always Musical Director Crispin Lewis succeeded in drawing a rich and well-balanced sound from a numerically unbalanced choir, with just one tenor and two basses to match a sizeable contingent of sopranos and altos. Crispin is also a professional singer, and certainly earned his money on this occasion by contributing vocal solos in between the choral items. All of the accompanied music was beautifully played by the Society's professional accompanist Elspeth Wilkes.

The evening began and ended with numbers by Bob Chilcott: his melodious setting of the famous Irish Blessing and his superbly jazzy arrangement of the spiritual 'Ev'ry time I Feel the Spirit'. The former demonstrated the choir's ability to sustain melodic lines, with upper voices to the fore, whilst the latter received an exhilarating performance, with skilful handling of the syncopations and close harmonies.

So what did we hear in between?

Arthur Sullivan's best-known part-song 'The Long Day Closes' came off generally well, with nice balancing of the beguiling harmonies and a moving close.

John Whitworth's ingenious arrangement of 'The Mermaid', made famous by The King's Singers, is a different piece altogether, and seemingly guaranteed to raise a smile even from listeners who dislike "fun songs". Tonight's performance was very jolly, and special mention should be made of the tenor's appropriately seafaring accent – though it was a pity that not everyone sang "marr-i-ed" as "marr-eye-ed", which the song requires.

Matyas Seiber was a modern English composer of Hungarian birth, with wide musical interests – he composed at least one pop song under the pseudonym George Mathis – but clearly drawn to the folk music of his native land, as is very evident from his a cappella setting of Three Hungarian Folksongs. Thurrock's singers captured the contrasting moods of the three sections well, the predominantly dance-like outer movements dispatched with verve (and an enthusiastic tenor line), the more lyrical central love song warmly characterised – and a little untidiness in the fast upper voice chords near the end could be readily forgiven.

In the second half the choir took us to France, with well-known sacred pieces by Franck ('Panis Angelicus') and Fauré (Cantique de Jean Racine'), followed by 'Calme des Nuits' by Saint-Saëns. The latter two pieces were sung in French, with generally acceptable pronunciation and all were touchingly delivered. The Saint-Saëns, in particular, is not easy to perform, and the choir deserves credit for such attention to details of dynamics and blend.

Crispin's solos also ranged widely, from Purcell and Mozart to Vaughan Williams, via Massenet, Verdi and Debussy. It was a pleasure to hear a well-developed baritone voice so expressively used, not least in Debussy's 'Beau Soir' (a highly appropriate song for the occasion), three of the memorable 'Songs of Travel' by Vaughan Williams, and Leporello's remarkable Catalogue Aria from 'Don Giovanni' – which clearly amused the audience.

Thank you, Thurrock Choral Society.

Richard Wade