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Bach heralds Advent with glorious singing

REVIEW

Cirencester Choral Society, Bingham Hall 5th December 2009

CIRENCESTER Choral Society concerts are usually sell-out events and last Saturday's performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, at Bingham Hall, was no exception.

This hugely popular work (here sung in English) is arguably the greatest ever written in celebration of the Christmas story and was originally performed on Christmas Day 1734, ending on the feast of the Epiphany on January 6. The Choral Society and the Corinium Camerata orchestra under its conductor, Carleton Etherington, performed *Parts* 1, 2, 3 and 6, which tell the story of the birth, annunciation to the shepherds, the adoration of the shepherds and the adoration of the Magi respectively, forming a wonderfully coherent account drawn from the Gospels of St Luke and St Matthew. In this work, the Evangelist (tenor) tells the story and the drama is further enhanced by soloists who perform roles that include the Angel and Herod.

The chorus, as usual on top form, gave thrilling accounts of the choruses which provide a commentary throughout, not only in the form of chorales (Lutheran hymn tunes), but also extended choruses in Praise of the Nativity.

The Evangelist, Richard Edgar-Wilson (tenor), projected the narrative confidently and sang with great eloquence and drama for what is probably the most demanding role in the work; though this really needed far more sensitivity from the harpsichord and cello continuo which failed to give the essential support to shape the melodic structure.

The tenor also sings two demanding arias, his vocal agility in *Haste ye Shepherds* being particularly effective.

The arias act as moments of contemplation to reflect on the story and form the most extended pieces in the work.

The soprano soloist, Charlotte Beaumont, who studies at the Guildhall

School of Music and Drama, sang with great conviction and possesses a clear, natural voice that was particularly effective as the Angel in the recitative, shared with the tenor, *Be not afraid*, and in the aria *Nought against the pow'r*: Katherine Grosset (alto), also from the Guildhall, is a very experienced singer and I enjoyed her performance of *Prepare Thyself Zion*, although Bach's music demands more decoration on occasions.

Julian Guidera (baritone), standing in at very short notice, gave a wonderful account of the aria *Mighty Lord and King*, with great assurance and technical skill. The orchestra, considering their brief rehearsal time, accompanied with confidence and support for both arias and choruses. The particularly demanding trumpet solo in the last chorus soared over both singers and orchestra, providing an uplifting and spirited finale, perfectly announcing the advent of Christmas.

If you missed this concert and it really was a treat, book Early for their next concert on May 1, 2010, in Cirencester Parish Church.

Richard Lester