

Review of ‘An English Summer Serenade’ with Portishead Choral Society

It was a warm summer evening on Saturday 11th June 2016 when, in the resonant Methodist Church Portishead, the Portishead Choral Society presented a most enjoyable selection of English music of wide variety of style and era, under the leadership of their musical director Jonathan Palmer.

The programme took the opportunity of this year being both the Queen’s 90th birthday and the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, both aptly demonstrated from the outset by Parry’s *England*, a fine setting of words from *Richard II* featuring strong unison lines, followed by the celebratory but challenging *Jubilate Deo* by Benjamin Britten. Later pieces in the programme maintained these themes with the patriotic *Coronation Ode* by Edward Elgar expressively performed with its passages of well crafted light and shade, and two choruses from the *Fairy Queen*, Purcell’s adaptation of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which featured a trio of soloists drawn from the body of the chorus.

At certain points in the programme a welcome variety in choral tone was achieved by featuring the ladies & the men as separate groups. The ladies performed an arrangement of Percy Grainger’s version of the folk song *English Country Garden* and Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Three Little Maids from School*, performed with just the right gaiety and lightness of touch. The men sang two sea shanties: *A-Roving* and *Way Haul Away*, the latter featuring a number of soloists in the call-and-response passages who were impressively robust, bold and clear. In these sea shanties an authentic ‘saltiness’ was provided by the concertina playing of Thom Gorst, who, in addition to his apposite accompaniment skills, played some delightful maritime airs and Morris dances, providing a rare glimpse of an unfamiliar but fascinating facet of England’s rich musical heritage.

Further folk music was performed drawing on the English choral tradition of folk song arrangements by two of its most well known masters: Vaughan Williams and John Rutter. The first was Vaughan Williams’ fine *Just as the Tide was Flowing* - a style of arrangement in which the choir clearly felt at home. Rutter’s *The Sprig of Thyme*, was an arrangement of nine contrasting folk songs displaying Rutter’s consummate craftsmanship in choral harmony. A particular feature of this performance was the inclusion of a Wind Quintet, *Harbour Winds*, in the arrangement that enhanced the overall effect, providing variety of colour, clarifying the harmony and drawing out particular musical lines.

Harbour Winds were also featured as a solo group, their unique sonority providing a welcome sorbet to the choral fare on offer. However their selection of music might have been thought through a little better. A shorter work in the first half than that of the Holst Quintet in A flat - which was nevertheless very well performed - would have helped to balance the programme. Also their selection of Norman Hallam's *Dance Suite* with its reliance on mainly American musical cliché was great fun but felt a little out of place in a programme of solid English music.

A survey of English choral music such as this would not be complete without examples of madrigals, and thus a small volunteer group of singers from within the choir performed two of perhaps its best-known examples, *The Silver Swan* by Orlando Gibbons and the discreetly bawdy *Now is the Month of Maying* by Thomas Morley. This was said to be something of an experiment but one that worked and therefore should be encouraged and further developed in the future.

The evening ended with that most ancient of all English music, the 13th century *Sumer is Icumen In*. This version, drawing on all resources available, including the audience, was brought together with great aplomb by the conductor.

In my experience, choral societies very seldom attempt this scope of work in a single evening, rather, relying mainly on a limited range of established, proven and well known choral masterworks. The diversity of music presented here by the Portishead Choral Society; from Gilbert and Sullivan to Benjamin Britten from Edward Elgar to folk song from madrigals to sea-shanties was bold and interesting and naturally placed demands on their experience of performance style, but which was a stretching they clearly relished. However, such diversity led to what some may have felt to be a somewhat lengthy concert.

In a moving and personal note by John Rutter included in the programme notes, one was made to reflect on just how fragile much of this tradition might be against the pervasive Beowulf of pop culture. We can appreciate, therefore, just how valuable this type of concert is in keeping these traditions alive. One must congratulate the Portishead Choral Society on its continuing adventurousness, and we look forward to seeing which fields they will venture into and explore next.

David Greenhorne (15th June 2016)