

## **Byrd's Great Service**

Birmingham Bach Choir at St Chad's Cathedral



The heroism of the Birmingham concert-going public knows no bounds. They brave the disaster area which is the city centre, which gets worse by the day, but are so often rewarded in return with riches.

And last Saturday those riches were spiritual as well as artistic, with Birmingham Bach Choir's stunning presentation of Byrd's Great Service within a revealing historical context, and performed in the awesome setting of Britain's first post-Reformation cathedral.

Paul Spicer's absorbing programme-note detailed the thinking behind his compilation, with hymns and voluntaries by Byrd's contemporaries Tallis and Gibbons interleaving the movements of the Service. Pragmatically, this also leavened what might have been monotony of pulse had the main work been performed without these interjections.

A bonus came with readings from John Donne by Archbishop Bernard Longley, delivered with acute understanding and empathy, but not totally well-served by the building's distancing acoustic. Choral sound was unaffected, however, Spicer shaping and colouring great waves of beautifully-phrased eloquence, and orchestrating vocal textures to our constant fascination, and when movements came to an end, the resonance was just enough to make us reflect upon glory.

Martyn Rawles' chamber organ was a discreet supporting presence virtually throughout (the unaccompanied Sing Joyfully came therefore as a spectacularly effective conclusion), and his solo voluntaries led individual lines naturally, inevitably, and with gorgeously chuffy registrations.

There were fine contributions from solo voices in consort, and the purity and fervour of Emily Carew-Gibbs' "Teach me, O Lord" made me wonder: has the Birmingham Bach Choir found its own counterpart to Ex Cathedra's alumna Carolyn Sampson?

**Christopher Morley**