

BIRMINGHAM BACH CHOIR CENTENARY CONCERT REVIEW

YOUNG IN SPIRIT AT 100 YEARS OLD

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Lichfield Cathedral ****

Musical centenaries are in the air: still who'd have guessed that the Birmingham Bach Choir was due a telegram from the Queen? As well as being consistently excellent in performance, it's always seemed so young in spirit. That was certainly the impression that came across at this Centenary Gala Concert, conducted by the Bach Choir's long-serving chief conductor Paul Spicer at Lichfield Cathedral.

Bach is de rigueur on such an occasion, and with The Musical and Amicable Society providing spirited period-instrument support, they opened with a performance of the motet Singet dem Herrn, which, despite buoyant direction from Spicer, sounded very slightly like a warm-up. By the second item – Handel's Dixit Dominus – textures had cleared. The altos and tenors seemed to have found their centre and Handel's grand gestures really rang out: brisk, brilliant and splendidly operatic.

The Bach Choir had treated itself to a top-notch quartet of soloists – well, you don't turn 100 every day – and Anita Watson's and Samantha Price's vocal lines melted yearningly into each another in their duet De Torrente. The ladies of the choir launched the final Et in saecula fugue with flashing energy; by now, the whole ensemble was on fire.

Still, it was a case of saving the best for last, with a big-hearted and gloriously dramatic account of Haydn's Nelson Mass. Spicer stretched and compressed choral phrasing to accentuate the music's urgency. Watson and baritone soloist Felix Kemp soared through their virtuoso solos, and as storm clouds gathered around the summit of the Benedictus, dark valveless trumpets cut thrillingly through the vocal textures. And because this was Haydn, it all ended with a blazing shout of joy. Now that's how to celebrate.

Richard Bratby