

Steal Away Birmingham Bach Choir CBSO Centre 06 June 2019: 7.30 *****5 Stars

Steal Away to Choral Bliss.

It is always interesting to hear a choir exploring new and unfamiliar territory. It was particularly exciting to experience Birmingham Bach Choir, a choir established to explore and celebrate the works of, mainly, J S Bach, which has established a reputation as an outstanding exponent of the classical repertoire, performing, in its centenary year, a concert of at times really very jazzy and upbeat spirituals.

The backbone of the evening was provided by three composers. The first of these was Moses Hogan, an arranger of spirituals who, during an all too brief life, brought the passion and rhythmic vitality of gospel to the genre. The concert kicked off with his arrangement of My Soul's Been Anchored. The slightly dry acoustic of the CBSO centre can be unforgiving but, in this instance, the forensic spotlight it cast was welcome, enabling the audience to appreciate precise attention to detail, exhilarating dynamic changes of gear and swinging syncopation.

Michael Tippett's Five Negro Spirituals followed. Originally arranged as a part of his Oratorio A Child of Our Time, this set of pieces found the choir on more familiar classical ground; generating a remarkably lush wall of texture during the more contemplative moments and finding an almost impressionistic quality of light in Nobody knows and By and By. A mention must go to bass soloist, Phillip Bellshaw, whose fruity and immediate vocal presence compelled attention in Go Down Moses.

One of the joys of the programme was an opportunity to hear the same core material in various very different realisations. John Rutter's choral cycle Feel the Spirit shared common sources with Tippet, but developed them through a very different musical language, applying a pastiche compositional approach: first jazz, then ragtime, then blues, etc. This was a work that enabled the choir to let its hair down, swing its hips and have some fun. Similarly moving was conductor Paul Spicer's "reimagining" (as he puts it) of [in italics] Steal Away. This offered a whole new contemporary perspective on what is undoubtedly a most exquisite & poignant text

Other composers figured in the programme. Will Todd's nativity carol My Lord has Come provided a moment of delicate stillness, sung with great sensitivity and control. Coleridge-Taylor is a composer we seldom get to hear. Two extracts from his Twenty-Four Negro Melodies, played with flair and gusto by pianist, Martin Rawles, complemented and provided interesting commentary on the rest of the programme. The other vocal soloists in the concert were similarly committed.

The evening ended with more Moses Hogan, Elijah Rock; a work created from complex layering of repeated rhythmic and melodic motifs. Well manged linking passages and changes of tempo highlighted a complete understanding between conductor and choir.

A hundred years old, this is a choir that displays all the benefits of maturity but shows no sign of ageing.

Paul Gray (Birmingham-based composer & academic; a former student of the late John Joubert. Currently a mature doctorate student of vocal & choral composition.) Regularly reviews for www.reviewsgate.com