

Birmingham Bach Choir Centenary Year Summer Concert

STEAL AWAY Pershore Abbey 22nd June 2019

There couldn't have been a more perfect setting for Birmingham Bach Choir's summer concert, in this their centenary year, than Pershore Abbey. When we arrived the abbey, bathed in the evening sunshine, was looking at it's best, and presaged the choral sunshine to which we were going to be treated.

This was an unusual concert for the choir. Their conductor, Paul Spicer told us the programme was somewhat 'out of the choir's comfort zone'. The assured performance that followed, however, showed no evidence of this. Largely of music based on well known Negro spirituals, and nearly all unaccompanied, the music revealed the choir at its best; beautiful and sensitive 'A Capella' singing which plumbed the emotional depths of this music. Orchestras are lovely, but evidently not always required by a choir of this calibre (to work its magic). More of this please!

Spicer kept the choir on its toes in the many syncopations which required rhythmic incisiveness; all masterfully executed.

During the course of the evening we heard some of the spirituals in several different harmonisations, including 'Steal Away' of which Paul Spicer has made a beautiful setting. What we began to realise was how great these tunes are, they don't pall. However many times one hears the rising interval up to 'over Jordan' it still has its powerful effect. Maybe because they were born from a deep place, the yearnings of an oppressed people. This, it could be argued, is what defines great music, or indeed any great art, that it arises from the deepest places in the human psyche; a yearning for freedom!

In addition to more familiar negro spirituals in settings by Tippett (from 'A Child of Time') and Rutter ('Feel the Spirit'), we heard some less familiar settings by African American composer Moses Hogan. His complex driving rhythms were handled to exhilarating effect by the choir. A Christmas piece by Will Todd, included for his use of jazz harmonies, provided a serene contrast, to which the choir brought a quiet intensity, as it did to Paul Spicer's own setting of 'Steal Away'. A

gift from him to the choir in their centenary year, with its unusual harmonic shifts his piece is both beautiful and fascinating.

Martyn Rawles, more usually employed on the Organ at Bach Choir Concerts, is also a highly accomplished pianist. His performance of two pieces from the seldom heard 'Twenty-Four Negro Melodies' by Samuel Coleridge Taylor was a real eye opener, or should I say ear opener. I am encouraged to search out a recording of these delightful pieces and am pleased to find there are a number of recordings available.

Moses Hogans 'Elijah Rock' brought to a thrilling conclusion this very enjoyable concert; a highly successful exploration into the world of Negro spirituals. Our appetite is whetted and we hope the choirs programmers don't wait 'til the choir's two hundredth centenary before repeating the experiment.

Reviewers: Margaret and Stuart Pickford.

About our Reviewers: Both closely involved with music, running choirs in the region, composing (Stuart) & teaching music (Margaret)