

REVIEWS: *Radiant Choral Masterpieces*

18 November, St Paul's Church, Birmingham



Keith Horsfall

Has an Hons degree in Music and a cello performers Diploma. He is a Fellow of the Royals Society of Arts and has been involved in conducting, arts education, and directing major festivals for over 40 years.

Birmingham Bach Choir presented an interesting and varied programme at St Pauls on Saturday. In the opening Bach motet *Furchte dich nicht* there was a pleasing lightness of tone combined with a clarity of line. This was evident throughout the piece, alongside some very effective terraced dynamics.

Martin Rawles' rendition of Bach's transcription of Vivaldi's *Double Violin Concerto in A minor* captured its original *joie de vivre* in the flanking movements and was suitably reflective in the central movement.

Scarlatti's *Stabat Mater* closed the first half of the concert. There was an excellent swell of sounds throughout and conductor Paul Spicer elicited a clarity of individual parts emerging through quite a dense texture. The work has a similarity of sound throughout, so this clarity of the polyphony, in both the quicker and slower sections, plus moments of dramatic word painting (in particular the *Et flagellis*) held our attention well. The occasional lapses in intonation from the choir did not detract from the overall enjoyment of the work.

Liszt's *Missa Choralis* comprised the bulk of the second half of the concert. The choir switched well from the baroque style into a much more expansive religious setting. There were some lovely moments – the explosive opening of the *Sanctus* and good dramatic contrasts in the *Credo* spring to mind – and the solo group mostly blended well, although there was a degree of hesitation at the close of the *Benedictus*.

From an audience perspective, I felt that the mid-work inclusion of Bach's *Chorale Prelude Schmucke Dich* broke the flow of the Liszt rather and felt too much of an intrusion.

An interesting and enjoyable evening.



Martyn Parfect

studied the clarinet at the Birmingham School of Music in the 1970s having previously studied with John Fuest of the RLPO. Now retired from playing professionally he now enjoys playing golf on a regular basis.

Opening a splendid concert by the Birmingham Bach Choir, appropriately billed as containing radiant choral masterpieces, was JS Bach's joyous short motet *Furchte dich nicht*, reputedly composed for a funeral in 1726. This is a work which is notoriously difficult to interpret and execute successfully, but on this occasion the piece was authoritatively yet sensitively directed by conductor Paul Spicer, with the choir giving an assured performance which impressed me. Set for double chorus, there are plenty of vocal challenges, which were well met by the choir, with both halves of the choir complimenting each other perfectly, coming together beautifully for the three-part fugue chorale.

With twice as many sopranos and altos than tenors and basses, I felt that the male voices sometimes struggled to be heard in Scarlatti's *Stabat Mater*, despite the sopranos being divided into 4 parts. An impressive work in a total of 10 parts, and sung without a break, Scarlatti's florid choral writing is spectacularly realised towards the end in *Inflammatius*, leading into a lively fugue before possibly one of the longest Amens ever! Despite some occasional lapses in intonation, this challenging work was well executed by the choir.

For me though, Liszt's *Missa Choralis* was the highlight of the evening. This excellent chamber choir has a knack of coming together perfectly for larger works, and this performance was not only impressive but also quite moving. In-house soloists more than did justice to their parts, and there was sympathetic organ accompaniment from Martyn Rawles. It was a stroke of genius to add Bach's Chorale Prelude *Schmucke Dich* three quarters of the way through. Possibly the most famous of the *Great 18 Chorale Preludes*