

KEITH HORSFALL REVIEW: Sacred Music Concert St Chad's Cathedral , March 2026



Keith Horsfall has a degree in Music and a cello Performers Diploma. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and has been involved in conducting, arts education, and directing major festivals for over 40 years

The Birmingham Bach Choir's 'Sacred Music' concert in St Chad's Cathedral was a feast of high renaissance music. The opulent surroundings and generous acoustic were perfectly suited to the complexity of the dense polyphonic music which, with the exception of Gibbons' 'Drop, drop, slow tears', which was a feature throughout.

The first half comprised the 'Tenebrae Responseries for Holy Saturday' by the infamous Carlo Gesualdo. The most extraordinary harmonies, constant modulations and intricate part writing, all a cappella, provided a stern test for the choir from whom conductor Paul Spicer extracted some lovely light and shade throughout as well as a well-balanced sound. The 'angst' of the 'Plange quasi virgo' was particularly effective although there did seem some hesitancy in the entries in the subsequent 'Recessit'. The 'O vos omnes' possessed beautiful tone and vocal control with the close of that section being particularly effective.

Special mention must be made of the solo group of Philip Bellshaw, Richard Swinbank, Graham Stroud, Jonathan Spence, Corinna Gregory and, in particular, Nicola Starkey who stepped in at the very last moment. Their lovely clarity of line and well-matched vocal quality provided the perfect foil for the larger choir.

The Archbishop of Birmingham provided some thoughtful readings interspersing the music.

The second half of the concert seemed almost lightweight after the Gesualdo, with organ pieces by Byrd and Titelouze, expertly performed by Martyn Rawles, and choral works by Gibbons, Lotti, Tallis, Byrd, Victoria and Phinot. Particularly enjoyable was Tallis's 'The Lamentations of Jeremiah' with its well-handled overlapping polyphony and harmonic clashes.

A feast of high renaissance music indeed!