

Farewell Concert a triumph – Harrogate Choral Society in Ripon Cathedral a review by John Dunford

The final concert, after fourteen years as conductor of Harrogate Choral Society, of Jeffrey Wynn Davies was marked by the conductor's own choice of programme; a programme which enabled the choir to take centre stage. The combination of two pieces by Ralph Vaughan Williams in the first half, and the German Requiem of Brahms in the second half allowed for a wide range of expression and musical colour in a largely reflective mood and lyrically based idiom.

The Vaughan Williams *Benedicite*, a text where just about everything blesses the Lord, was a suitably exuberant piece to start the programme. In the opening section the orchestra and choir immediately captured the joyful spirit of the work. A splendid oboe solo and a significant soprano solo led to a more reflective section with some lush string playing and tight ensemble woodwind playing. In the final section the forthright music of the opening returned and built to a tremendously uplifting climax, the soprano soaring above the choir. It was an obvious choice for conductor's wife to be the soprano soloist for his final concert and a good choice it proved to be. Fiona Clucas's effortless voice and sense of lyricism conveyed the character of the piece over the wide vocal range demanded of the part.

The Five Mystical Songs are settings of poems by the 17th century poet George Herbert. In the first four songs the baritone soloist is accompanied by the choir, the final number, a hymn of praise, being sung with great enthusiasm by choir alone. The young baritone, Ben Davies, warmed to the task. His light and even voice conveyed the words with expressive beauty. In the fourth poem, a fine setting of 'The Call', his more forthright approach displayed both warmth and conviction. The Choir and orchestra supported well displaying a wide range of instrumental and vocal colour throughout.

The major work of the evening was Brahms much loved German Requiem. The thrust of the biblical text is of words of comfort, of Lutheran origin, as opposed to the text of the Requiem Mass. It is thickly scored with much importance given to the woodwind section. The Chameleon Arts Orchestra played beautifully throughout the evening, the entire programme being an orchestral players delight. The strings provided a rich foundation while some superb woodwind playing, in particular from the first flute added richness to the texture. The brass were largely subdued, even understated at the climaxes while the timpani were placed close to the audience with mixed results. Sometimes they were overpowering yet at other times, such as in the second movement of the Brahms, where the relentless triplet figure pounds away, the tension created was palpable.

Both soloists gave an assured account in the Brahms. A more confident Ben Davies again conveyed the words with warmth and beauty in his voice. The ability of Fiona Clucas to float sound was admirably displayed in her taxing solo, in spite of the movement feeling, for the one and only time in the entire evening, rushed.

I do not think I have been to a concert of the Harrogate Choral Society in the last fourteen years where I have felt that the choir was anything other than well prepared. Under Jeffrey Wynn Davies they have had the benefit of a hugely experienced and respected choral director who has developed a purity and unity of sound in all voices, most pleasingly in the soprano section, of which he is justly proud. This was one of the features of the evening. The well balanced and blended tone was at its best in the many reflective and quieter passages, with occasional flatness from the sopranos the only flaw. In the weightier moments, which required a fuller tone, the choir were not always able to project above the orchestral forces, but this was a minor quibble in a concert where the contribution of the choir was immense. Their ensemble and their diction was excellent throughout, most notably in the demanding fugal section at the end of the third movement in the Brahms. The much loved 'How lovely are thy dwellings' showed the lyrical melodic lines to great effect and the gravitas of the second movement was well managed with a suitably heavy speed.

Jeffrey Wynn Davies has given the concert going public of Harrogate and district many memorable concerts over fourteen years. He has left a fine, strong and well balanced choir in good spirits and fine voice to hand on to another superb choral director, Andrew Padmore. I am sure the near capacity audience at Ripon Cathedral would wish to congratulate Jeffrey on his great legacy and wish him and Harrogate Choral Society every success in the future.