

MOZART'S MAGIC CASTS AN UNFORGETTABLE SPELL!

Harrogate Choral Society in Ripon Cathedral, a review by John Dunford

On a night where the quirky foibles of the Eurovision Song Contest as well as the more impressive BBC Young Musician of the Year were a potential distraction, a magnificent mid-May Magical Mozart concert, given by the Harrogate Choral Society was sold out well in advance. This was undoubtedly due to the eagerly anticipated performance of a past winner of the latter competition, Emma Johnson, who continues to delight audiences the world over, and although she may have been the star attraction, this was far from a one woman show.

The programme was packed with familiar and attractive music. It began with the little gem, Ave verum corpus, written for choir and string orchestra. Singing from memory the choir responded to every motion from the conductor, producing a full, rich and well blended tone in all parts with expressive phrasing and excellent control of dynamics, supported well by a suitable rich string tone from the orchestra.

Exsultate Jubilate is, arguably, the most popular motet for solo soprano. It brought to the platform the towering presence of Kate Valentine. This was to be one of the many joys of the evening. Kate used her clear and strong voice so instrumentally that the ensemble with the orchestra was superb throughout. The coloratura passagework was given effortlessly, and her smile as she sang the last two phrases, including the top C for which we were all waiting, showed an artist whose communication with the audience and performers drew us into a splendid and thoroughly absorbing performance.

Two equally wonderful choral works, the Solemn Vespers and the Mass in C brought each half of the concert to a conclusion, and introduced Alison Hudson, alto, Paul Dutton, tenor, and Thorbjørn Gulbrandsøy, bass, to the platform. It would be fair to say that the trio are a support for the more significant soprano solo line since they sing entirely as a quartet. Alison Hudson and Paul Dutton, both Yorkshire based, sang admirably while Thorbjørn Gulbrandsøy's saved his best singing for the Mass in C, appearing less comfortable with the Solemn Vespers. Here his pleasing tone did not carry sufficiently in the large acoustic of the Cathedral and his tendency to sing behind the rest of the quartet gave the impression of uncertainty. Kate Valentine continued her excellent performance, the Laudate Dominum enabling her to show control and beauty of sound, floating above the choir with the greatest of ease.

There was a palpable air of expectancy as the audience awaited the arrival of Emma Johnson after the interval. In a stunning white dress Emma exuded an aura and warmth which captured the listener before a note had been played. The clarinet concerto must be one of the most familiar pieces of the classical repertoire and is full of beauty, delicacy, and tenderness. The hushed Cathedral suddenly became a small room as we were drawn into the most intimate of renditions with great empathy between orchestra, conductor and soloist. Mozart himself wrote excitedly to his father to tell him of the first occasion he had heard the clarinet and he described it as having an expressiveness akin to that of the human voice. Musically and technically Emma's playing was magnificent and so apparently at ease, but beyond that was a range of expression and an individuality in performance that was as engrossing and a privilege to witness. She and the instrument act as one and those present will remember this performance and Emma Johnson's 40th birthday for many years to come.

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A year on since I last heard the Society I was keen to note any changes under the new musical direction of Andrew Padmore. The sopranos, whose tone I much admire, had more guts to their singing than last year, as did the basses, while the altos and tenors blended and balanced well creating a splendid overall warmth of tone. The ensemble was good throughout and diction crisp and clear and the choir managed the quicker speeds chosen in some of the movements with the agility and precision of a much smaller unit. The choir was supported by the excellent Chameleon Arts Orchestra, the strings making a silky and effortless tone through some challengingly quick passagework.

The concert was under the brilliant direction of the dynamic figure of Andrew Padmore. His tirelessness and attention to detail was evident throughout the evening. He had brought the choir to their end of season concert in fine voice and through a variety of well chosen tempi he maintained a momentum and interest for the audience throughout the evening that made it truly memorable and magical. Given the chance the Eurovision vote of this audience would have gone to a 250 year old musician from Salzburg whose music enthralled and delighted throughout the evening, while the vote for Young Musician of the Year would remain with the ever youthful Emma Johnson.

HCS also received several emails following the concert Here are some extracts....

“Went to the concert lat night and it was magical. How do we get advanced notice of concerts? “
NB

“I would just like to just say how much both my husband and I enjoyed the Mozart concert on Saturday 20th May, the Ave Verum was so absolutely beautiful a lovely smooth performance with the right amount of sensitivity for the lyrics, It sent tingles al the way down my back and a tear to my eyes. The solemn vespers and the mass were wonderful and wasn't Emma Johnson fantastic.”
CN

“Brilliant, the Ave Verum moved me tears, it was wonderful the Contralto had a lovely rounded sound Emma Johnson was fantastic the choir are well rehearsed and on the whole they were watching the conductor which makes so much differenceWe will be taking cushions to the next concert! ... no doubt we'll be bringing an entourage.” C