

Bakewell Choral Society

Review of November 2009 concert by Professor John Tarn OBE, DL

November is the month of remembrance and a fitting time, before the Christmas seasons overwhelms everyone, to pause and contemplate the state of the world, its problems and those who are now departed this life. Which is to say that the programme of requiems sung by the Choral Society touches that mood in way which perhaps reflects the last century much more than the nineteenth. Both composers represented lived through the two World Wars and inevitably their music at times reflects the horror of war and because they are both in essence religious works they reflect the underlying hope which for many still exists. So, neither has the bombast of Verdi or Berlioz, nor perhaps do they have quite the starkness of the later Britten. Neither set the terrifying words of the Dies Irae, although Vaughan Williams does turn to the poetry of Walt Whitman, as well as Biblical sources, for much of his text. His *Dona Nobis Pacem* is not strictly a requiem in the sense that it sets the liturgical texts of the Mass. Durufle, however, was all his life a church musician, and sticks quite closely to the Mass and his Requiem is in the French tradition of Faure.

The Durufle was sung in his own arrangement for choir, soloists, organ and string orchestra. It has an intimacy and a radiance, but at the same time a tension which is not always evident in his model, the more famous Faure Requiem. In this sense it is much more a work of the twentieth century. Anna Mundy, well known here in Bakewell, and a young baritone from the Royal Northern School of Music, Bradley Travis, sang eloquently the relatively modest solo parts while the choir delivered the lions share of the quite difficult musical writing.

In the Vaughan Williams the same forces, with the exception that Andrew Kirk transferred from organ to piano, scaled the tougher requirements of one of our greatest English composers. His writing here, of 1936, does not draw on the folk-song melodies and traditional church tunes he favoured so much in his early days, and moves on towards the abstract power of the later symphonies – only the first four had emerged at this time. It was written for the centenary of a great English choir the Huddersfield Choral Society. The work is stark, powerful, often intense, and yet at the end, before the hushed final bars, triumphant and serenely hopeful. The audience departed into the dark November night not with great melodies but strangely and perhaps appropriately with a great affirmation “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will towards men” ringing in their ears.

This was not an easy programme but it was rewarding, and I think for the choir, spread out from side side of the church, it was a journey through light and darkness, tension and serenity, bleakness and hope. The demanding scores were sung with conviction and insight and, as ever, effectively accompanied by Andrew Kirk and the Heart of England String Orchestra. The shaping of the works and the lasting musical impression was, of course, that of Richard Barnes. I think his real empathy for this kind of music was always evident.