



Excellent control in a virtuoso test for any choir.

An all Bach programme was presented by the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society last Saturday evening in Wells Cathedral together with Music for Awhile Orchestra on period instruments and soloists: Ali Darragh [Soprano], Simon Clulow [Countertenor], Iain MacLeod-Jones [Tenor], Greg Skidmore [Baritone] conducted by Matthew Owens.

As an opener we heard the first of Bach's six Brandenburg Concertos – a four movement work in F major. Probably written as a job testimonial, it appears the Margrave of Brandenburg never bothered to have them played. They are now amongst Bach's most popular works. Music for Awhile played throughout with elan and lightness of style led by their renowned Leader Maggie Faultless. The concerto features 2 Horns - Bach asked for Hunting horns [was the Margrave a hunting Man?]. The Horn players have virtuoso parts to contend with in the work which came across admirably and topped a very enjoyable performance.

Bach wrote a number of Mass settings for use in the Lutheran liturgy. These featured just the Kyrie and Gloria and often included re-workings of Cantata movements. Such is the case with the "Lutheran" Mass in F next on the programme. The opening Kyrie showed the chorus in fine form with confident entries in the fugal texture complimented by clear diction and good tuning. Excellent control was shown in the opening movement of the Gloria - a virtuoso test for any choir – where Bach's orchestral like demands on the chorus, with very little let up in the pace, came over thrillingly aided by sparkling orchestral accompaniment with Horns and Oboes to the fore.

Greg Skidmore as the Bass soloist gave a full throated performance of the Domine Deus aria with its striding arpeggio and scale like passages complimented with chirpy passage work from the Violin in contrasting counterpoint.

Bach allotted the reflective Qui tollis section to the Soprano soloist with Oboe obbligato. Here we were treated to bell like clarity in the singing of Ali Darragh who brought out the tender poignancy in the text as also did the oboe soloist with her part gently interweaving with the soprano line.

Simon Clulow was the excellent Countertenor in the Quoniam aria. This was a demanding part for both soloist and the accompanying Violin and came across with an expressive vigour appropriate to the text.

The chorus rounded off the Gloria with well-controlled, vigorous singing in the final Cum Sancto Spiritu section with horns and oboes adding a festive edge to the orchestral accompaniment.

After the interval the final work was Bach's Cantata: Wachet auf [Sleepers wake] based on the well known Chorale associated with the beginning of Advent. In the long opening movement for the chorus the Sopranos sing the chorale in long held notes with Altos, Tenors and Basses having fugal like entries weaving in and out of the chorale harmony with throbbing accompaniment from the orchestra. Once again the chorus rose to the occasion with the Sopranos producing thrilling and sustained singing of the long chorale melody supported by rhythmical entries from the other parts.



After a short Tenor recitative ably sung by Iain MacLeod-Jones we had the expressive duet Wenn kommst [When will you come, my Saviour] for Soprano and Bass. This elaborate aria with Violin obbligato is a dialogue between the longing soul and Jesus. The singing and playing here was of a high order with a chamber music like finesse with both soloists capturing the spirit of the words and music.

The Tenor soloist took the Chorale melody in Zion hort [Zion hears the watchmen sing]. Often played in its organ arrangement by Bach the chorale was sung with suitable simplicity with a repeating phrase as counter melody from the Strings.

After another linking recitative sung by the Bass the final duet for Soprano and Bass is one of the highlights of the work – the lovely Mein freund is mein [My friend is mine]. Again a dialogue between Christ and the longing soul the singing here was a delight with the two soloists well matched with the solo Oboe adding a beautifully judged line above the voices.

Under the excellent direction of Matthew Owens, the conductor, this was a most enjoyable concert of some of Bach's finest music.

David Nichols November 2015