

# Choir rose to the robust challenge of a great work

**H**OLYBOURNE Singers returned to their classical choral repertoire with Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle* which they performed at their pre-Christmas concert at St Lawrence Church, Alton.

The *Petite Messe Solennelle*, so called because it was written late in the composer's life for relatively smaller forces than usual (a chamber choir accompanied by pianos and harmonium), is rightly considered one of his greatest works. It demonstrates Rossini's gift for producing emphatically bouncing melody and melting harmony, and is an example of the robust technical demands made by his operas on their performers.

These qualities of the piece were fully realised and its demands amply met by the Holybourne Singers under the formidable direction of their conductor Rebekah Abbott. This dedicated choir again demonstrated an ability to combine technical discipline with innate musicality, matching enthusiastic musical emotion with performance refinement.

From the sotto voce

*Kyrie* entries to the ringing choral fanfares which open the *Gloria*, from the resounding final repeated *Credo* affirmation to the quiet but urgently pleading *Dona nobis pacem* at the end of the work, the choir showed how they have grown in vocal maturity, mastering the range of dynamics and inflexion required to paint such a broad musical canvas.

The real test for a choir can often be a work's complex contrapuntal passages, much beloved of first-rank choral composers. Nowhere is this more so than in the customarily grand fugal settings of *Cum Sancto Spiritu* and *Et Vitam Venturi* which conclude respectively the *Gloria* and *Credo*. Holybourne Singers in no way disappointed here but rose superbly to the challenge. Particularly impressive was the vigour and confidence with which each part tackled each successive fugue subject entry, while maintaining the essential flow of the interweaving lines where no one part has 'the tune', to produce a perfectly homogeneous whole.

The choir was further back than usual in St Lawrence church, in the sanctuary, with the soloists in the choir stalls, accommodating the piano and harmonium placed further forward. This produced a well-rounded and clear but still warm acoustic, with good blending between singers and accompaniment. With no room for chairs in this position, the only unfortunate trade-off was the choir's exit to sit down for the long solo section during the *Gloria*, resulting in the hiatus of their re-entry just at the point where the music really wants to drive straight through from its quiet modulation after *Quoniam* into the *allegro maestoso* introduction to *Cum Sancto Spiritu*.

The soloists complemented beautifully the quality of the choir. Soprano Holly Marie Bingham and mezzo-soprano Lucy Waring, both from Guildhall School of Music, each had a thrilling depth of tone which blended perfectly with the other in the *Qui Tollis* duet and produced exciting results in their individual solos, particularly the soprano's lyri-

cal *O Salutaris Hostia* (a movement not usually included in choral settings of the Mass) and the alto's throbbing intensity underpinning the *Agnus Dei*. Tenor Simon Irwin and bass Andrew de Silva (both lay clerks at Winchester Cathedral) were as technically accomplished but less full-voiced throughout their respective ranges. The tenor did not blend so well as the others in their ensemble pieces and his tone was not quite equal to the robust operatic demands of *Domine Deus*. It was a pleasure to hear the bass deliver *Quoniam Tu Solus* with such an even line and smooth timbre.

Rossini's original piano and harmonium version of the *Petite Messe Solennelle* provides no less a test for the instrumentalists (his own later orchestration was not published until after his death when the work was performed for the first time in public). Local composer Chris Gardner gave a mostly responsive account of the piano part, with relatively few noticeable stumbles given its length and difficulty, although his opting to play from the untexted piano score did appear occasionally to lead to some difficulty in keeping in time with the soloist ensemble. The somewhat quirky harmonium scoring for the most part fills in mood, colour and texture and was played sensitively and accurately throughout by Richard McVeigh, a regular organist and accompanist for the choir, and notably where the harmonium comes into its own in the extraordinary chromatic counterpoint of the *Preludio Religioso*, another unusual movement for a Mass.

All in all, conductor, choir, soloists and instrumentalists more than did justice to a challenging but immensely rewarding work. Rossini's music requires vigour, spirit and technique from all departments; in giving just that, Rebekah Abbott and the Holybourne Singers have notched up another triumph. Look out for their next concert: *Elijah* by Mendelssohn on Saturday, March 28, in St Andrew's Church, Farnham. Tickets are on sale now at [hsboxoffice@gmail.com](mailto:hsboxoffice@gmail.com)

Contributed

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(Scout) and Leo Heller (Dill) Johan Persson.