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**Review of a Concert by The Tonbridge Philharmonic Society.**

**Tonbridge School Chapel, Saturday 24 November 2018**

**Roger Evernden**

One of the strongest musical memories from my teenage years is listening to the first two performances of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* on the radio, and then hearing it live at the Proms. Even then, I was very aware that this was a special experience and that a masterpiece had been created.

Like many choral societies around the nation, Tonbridge chose Britten's *War Requiem* as the work which would appropriately mark the centenary commemoration of the end of the First World War. This work is not one to be chosen casually, because it is formidably challenging, both musically and emotionally. Matthew Willis and his musical forces took on this challenge and gave the capacity audience a memorable evening. This was Matthew's last concert with the Society and we are deeply grateful to him for what he has achieved during his distinguished and inspiring tenure; we wish him well in his future professional life. As with all the concerts Matthew has directed, this was music that showed great interpretative insight and meticulous preparation of the choir and orchestra. That he chose to conduct both the large forces and the chamber ensemble and soloists was an added responsibility. The consequence of this was that we lost the clear separation that Britten intended between the universal feelings expressed by the large choir, singing in the more impersonal language of Latin, with its orchestra, and the raw humanity expressed by the soloists and their small orchestra. This group needs to be in closer contact with the audience. Spatial limitations in the chapel hinder such separation. Conversely, the young voices in the distant gallery benefited from the building's layout.

The mood of the evening was established in an original and moving way. Following some reflections on the origins of the work by Barry Holden from Decca (who made the 1960s recording of the work), members of the Society read war poems by Wilfred Owen which we would hear later in the work itself. This was particularly well done, interspersed with the mournful tolling of the bells, which, again, Britten uses as the *leitmotif* for discord in the music.

The music itself is demanding for all the performers. The choir and orchestra were impressive, and the chamber orchestra outstanding in its flexibility, technique and tonal and expressive range. There were moments of great beauty (*Recordare*) and others, which were frankly terrifying in their intensity (*Libera me*, before the final duet).

Although Britten chose boys' voices for his distant choir, which sings in a state of innocent purity, the girls from Tonbridge Grammar School Motet Choir (thoroughly trained and conducted by Adrian Pitts), were equal to the task, singing with focus and the required emotional detachment. Christopher Harris gave a suitably other-worldly organ accompaniment.

Much of the emotional weight of the work is devolved to the team of three soloists. Britten envisaged a symbolic gesture of reconciliation by choosing British, German and Russian soloists for the first performance. These are very demanding roles for young singers. And this is where one of the enduring problems inherent in performing the *War Requiem* arises; the power of those first performances directed by Britten, and their associated recording, has established a sort of aural *urtext*, to which all successive performances must aspire. Our soloists, Sofia Troncoso (soprano), Bradley Smith (tenor) and Tristan Hambleton (bass-baritone), quickly established their own interpretation of these demanding texts and demonstrated Britten's infallible ability to capture the intellectual and emotional meaning of the words. This was a great credit to their musicianship and dramatic skill. The soprano voice was truly commanding and beautifully controlled, whilst the sensitivity shown by the tenor and baritone was remarkable. It was particularly moving when they left their high pulpit positions and stood next to each other in that final meeting of the two soldiers – *I am the enemy you killed, my friend*.

So, although I arrived in good time, the chapel was packed and I had to sit right at the back. Despite the discomfort of the pews, the dim lighting which precluded reading the texts in the excellent programme, the total inability to see the performers, the skewed sound balance, and the misjudgement of having the soloists walk distractingly through the audience during that inspired, hushed, final, tonal and emotional reconciliation of discord, the evening was a memorable and moving one. When joining with professionals, and given the opportunity by an inspiring composer and conductor, ordinary musical amateurs can both experience the intense satisfaction of taking part in such an occasion, and invite others to share that experience. That so many people performed and listened, and reflected on the message - *My subject is War, and the pity of War, The poetry is in the pity, All a poet can do today is warn* – confirms the importance of the artist's voice in our still troubled world.