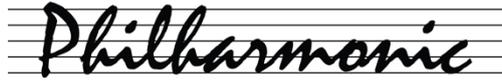


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Review of a Choral Concert by The Tonbridge Philharmonic Society.

by Ruth Langridge

Tonbridge School Chapel - 24 March 2018

The programme chosen by Tonbridge Philharmonic Society's conductor Matthew Willis on Saturday was a challenging one. Bringing together two works by American-Jewish composers was a successful idea, and introduced many of us to a new work, seldom performed. Aaron Copland's *In the Beginning* opened the concert with radiant Welsh mezzo **Eirlys Myfanwy Davies** setting the scene for the biblical story of the Creation of the world from the Book of Genesis, unaccompanied and spine-tingling. The semi-chorus gave their all in this work of tricky jazzy and syncopated rhythms, with clear diction in their repeated familiar words: '*and the evening and the morning were the nth day*'; '*and God saw that it was good*' etc. Decisive direction elicited buoyant and joyous moments, and the delicate and discrete accompaniment of the harp added another dimension to this unusual and beguiling work.

Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, written for the Southern Cathedrals Festival in Chichester in 1965, retains the Hebrew language and is scored for strings, three trumpets, three trombones, and an array of percussion and timpani. A thunderous opening was testament to the excellent percussion section, and throughout the concert, the orchestra, led by Susan Skone James, played with verve and attack. The chorus however was sometimes overwhelmed by the orchestra, and the soloists, standing between the choir and orchestra, occasionally difficult to hear. The beautiful second movement from Psalm 23 uses music taken from an unused chorus in *West Side Story*. Soprano **Kirstin Sharpin** gave us a serene and luminous reading of the solo melody, which could almost have been a ballad from her native Scotland. The tenors and basses rudely interrupt the tranquil music asking '*why do the nations rage?*' before returning to the previous calm. Passionate strings begin the spare and intense third movement but give way to a gentle prayer for peace, leading to a hushed ending.

Giuseppe Verdi wrote his Four Sacred Pieces between 1886 and 1897 but they are not performed in chronological order. This is a strange and disparate collection of pieces, brought together by publisher Ricordi, and sometimes sung separately, especially the *Laudi alla Vergine Maria*. Scored for unaccompanied ladies' voices, this movement is in Italian, whereas the other three are written in Latin. The chorus gave an impassioned performance in the *Te Deum* with its rich textures and harmonies, and the soloists revelled in this long last movement. The four soloists were beautifully matched and perfectly suited to this work, all being established opera singers. Icelandic bass **Hrolfur Saemundsson** gave us an assured line, and the powerful tenor **William Morgan**, replacing at two days' notice an indisposed Fabricio Gori, is to be congratulated on his outstanding contribution to the

concert. Throughout the work, Matthew Willis produced a full range of dynamics, with some dramatic crescendos particularly in the *Stabat Mater*. The concert was tribute to bold and unusual programme planning, and a wise choice of soloists.