

Darlington & Stockton Times

Review: Harrogate Festival Chorus and Orchestra, Ampleforth Abbey



The concert is the culmination of a five-day Harrogate Festival Choral Course in choral singing held at Ampleforth College. This is the ninth year the course has run, and singers from all over the country attend. Stunningly high standards of choral singing are achieved under the baton of Thom Meredith, whose conducting I particularly admire – sensitive, unobtrusive and entirely effective. This year was no exception.

The accompanists were Beryl Pankhurst, piano, Elinor Nicholson, harpist and organist Jonathan Scott on a rather special instrument – a black Mustel harmonium, built in Paris in 1880, and regarded as the "Rolls Royce" of its day.

The concert was introduced by Lynn Hudson, and while the acoustic is good for choral singing, unfortunately the spoken word tends to get swallowed up by the vast dome overhead. However, good programme notes were available.

The abbey acoustic came into its own at the first notes of music and we were immediately transported by the lovely tenor voice of Nicholas Watts in Janacek's *Otcenas*, a version of the Lord's Prayer which was beautiful.

Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*, far from "petite" by any reckoning, is a magnificent full-length choral mass and every part was given its due.

The singing by both chorus and soloists was superb, including a marvellous performance of *Quoniam tu solus sanctus* by bass baritone Paul Gibson which really raised the goosebumps, all with perfect instrumental accompaniment.

Cum Sancto Spiritu was a joy, with all voices giving their best, enriched by piano and harmonium.

In the second half the sweetly melodic passage in the *Credo* was performed by the quartet of soloists. The *Crucifixus* was beautifully sung by Sarah Ogden and the *Et resurrexit* was accomplished with a wonderful weaving of voices. We also had a great opportunity to hear the rare harmonium superbly played by Jonathan Scott in the *Preludio religioso*.

The singing was magnificent throughout, and the final *Agnus Dei* showcasing the glorious voice of contralto Julianne Young brought the *Messe* to a beautiful close.

Full details of the HFCC 2017 choral course will be available on the website www.hfccourse.co.uk later this year.

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