

CHORAL SOCIETY EXCELS IN BRAHMS' GERMAN REQUIEM

Axminster Choral Society has performed Brahms' German Requiem in earlier years, using the familiar English translation. For their Spring concert, held in the Minster on 28th April, they mastered the original German text and, under the direction of Peter Parshall, produced a powerful and deeply moving performance. The choir of more than 80 singers filled the space below the altar and the audience filled every available seat in the pews in front of them. They were not to be disappointed.

This work is not based on the classic Requiem Mass with its traditional Latin format. This is the outpouring of Brahms the Lutheran, the thinker and composer, sharing the soul-searching of men contemplating death and looking for comfort. Significantly, its first performance in 1868 was on a Good Friday. Although written for chorus and orchestra, Brahms later wrote a piano arrangement for two players. The first mention of a performance in English records a private meeting in 1871, in a London house, with piano duet accompaniment. On this evening, the demands made on the two pianists, Peter Lea-Cox and Andrew Millington, were exacting: their unflagging excellence was breathtaking.

A large choir performing a sensitive work requires discipline. Peter Parshall has led this amateur group of singers to new heights, nurturing quality of tone and expression. The Requiem is a most demanding work for the choir which is in action without a break, as even the solo parts are written for soloist and chorus. Their concentration was exemplary, eyes on the baton ready to respond to changes in dynamics or tempo which were part of the structure from the very first movement. A notable achievement was the quality of the low register, with not only basses and altos required to produce notes at the extreme ends of their range; this was particularly impressive in the 'funeral march' of *Den alles Fleish - For all flesh*. The translation of the text in the programme notes was most helpful to non-German speakers as it bracketed important words in German next to their English counterparts.

The soloists, Harriet Mountford, soprano, and Julian Rippon, baritone, making a welcome return to Axminster, gave memorable performances. *Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen – How lovely are thy dwellings* gave Harriet a lyrical vehicle for her glowing soprano range, during which the quiet accompaniment of the chorus was remarkably well controlled. Julian's two movements were similarly scored for soloist and chorus, with the dramatic *Denn wir haben hie keine bleibende Statt – For we have here no lasting place* providing a climax of intense activity. Singers were given a short respite during a Brahms Choral Prelude, arranged for piano duet by Peter Lea-Cox, before setting forth on the final movement *Selig sind die Toten – Blessed are the dead*. After the sombre questioning and dramatic reassurances, blessed resolution is finally achieved. Tenors and sopranos were given an opportunity to show their strengths, altos and basses echoed the lyrical phrases, and the whole movement provided a thrilling climax to the Requiem, exploring the full range of register and dynamics. The closing phrase is marked *pianissimo*. The final note was held just above a whisper. As the music died away, the conductor held his baton still, no-one moved and the audience remained silent. The baton came down; the applause shook the rafters. It had been a triumph for those who took part and a memorable experience for those who came to listen.

Sydie Bones