

## CHORAL SOCIETY BRINGS GLORIOUS MUSIC TO THE MINSTER

### John Rutter's GLORIA and Joseph Jongen's MASS Opus 130

Axminster Choral Society's Spring Concert, held in the Minster on 29<sup>th</sup> April, featured two compositions from the 20<sup>th</sup> century written in markedly different circumstances. At the end of his career, the 70-year-old Belgian, Joseph Jongens, wrote this glorious Mass in 1945 as a response to the liberation of Europe at the end of WWII. In contrast, John Rutter at 29 was early in his career in the 1970s when he was asked to compose a 'challenging' choral work for a choir in Nebraska and responded with his now familiar and popular Gloria. Both works are thoroughly modern, both are challenging, and both surprisingly call for similar orchestral accompaniment. When the musicians entered at the beginning of the concert, there was no sign of the usual strings and woodwind instruments; across the front row were four horns and a tuba, flanked by trumpets and trombones. With Peter Lea-Cox at the organ and Judy Martin on the rostrum, the 70-strong choral society stood to perform Jongen's Mass.

*The Gramophone* (2007) rated this impressive work as one of the best Mass settings of the mid-twentieth century. Its form is traditional, six parts from *Kyrie* to *Agnus Dei*, mainly choral. The short solo and semi-chorus sections in the *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* were exquisitely performed by four members of the University of Exeter Chapel Choir and soprano soloist Harriet Mountford. Although a religious work, this mass is also highly dramatic, using the organ and brass to great effect, but always supporting and never drowning the voices. The final bars of the *Gloria* brought the first section to a climax with a magnificent *Amen*. A gentle and haunting organ interlude *Chant de Mai* followed, written for the first performance. Trombones are rarely heard as sole accompaniment, but they were the stars of the opening of the *Credo*.

Tenors too deserve special mention here, holding their own though few in number. The dramatic impact intensified as the work progressed – a flourish of horns announced the exuberant *Sanctus* leading into a lively fugue. The *Benedictus* softened the mood, phrases passing to and fro between choir and soloists before coming together in triumphant Hosannas. The *Agnus Dei* brought the Mass to its close, quiet and contemplative, a lovely soprano solo in the middle and fragments of semi-chorus, ending with an extended *Dona nobis pacem* 'Grant us peace'. In 1945 those words must have been particularly poignant.

The second half of the concert opened with an intriguing organ duet, five variations on a traditional Easter hymn, played by Peter Lea-Cox and Peter Parshall. For the Gloria there was a change of instruments as trumpets, percussion and tamps took over from the horns. With Peter Parshall wielding the baton, a dramatic drum roll and flourish of trumpets marked the opening bars. Rutter himself described the three sections as 'exalted, devotional and jubilant'. The choir responded magnificently, tackling the complex 'question and answer' structure of traditional English choral works with confidence and precision. The quieter middle section, which included solos from soprano and alto, was indeed devotional in spirit and in sound. The 'jubilant' rhythms of the final section are pedigree Rutter, reminiscent of Walton and American jazz, and the conductor is to be congratulated on keeping a tight rein on the choir as the piece thundered towards its climax of the '*tutta forza*' *Amen*. The final bars were left to the organ and orchestra, dramatic and exciting, especially for the percussion player who had to leap from drum to cymbals for the final chord. It had been an evening to remember, an opportunity to rejoice in the music in our town and give thanks for the peace that we take for granted.

*Sydie Bones*