

MICHAEL HAYDN'S REQUIEM & MOZART'S CORONATION MASS

An Unknown Rarity at Axminster Choral Society. Sat 25th November 2017

Axminster and District Choral Society at its Autumn Concert last Saturday performed two works, one very familiar, and the other a considerable rarity. The programme consisted of Mozart's 'Coronation Mass' Missa Brevis in C, K317, one of the most popular and well-known of Mozart Masses. Written in March 1779 for the Cathedral at Salzburg, where Mozart had just gained employment as Court organist and composer, it is an absolutely typical mass setting of its period, replete with all the liturgical and musical niceties one would expect of the period and place, including omitting violas from the orchestral score, and the double recapitulation of the Benedictus, to cover the Consecration. The solo quartet is very much that – they are occupied mostly as a small semi chorus and their contribution is as a team.

Axminster were well served by their four soloists, Harriet Mountford, Juliet Cernow, Ben Inman, and Sam Hucklebridge who worked together with a fine sense of balance as a team. Individually, for this reviewer, the contralto and bass were probably the most noteworthy voices of this ensemble, although in the Agnus Dei of the mass, which Mozart treated fashionably as a 'mini-concerto' for soprano soloist, chorus and orchestra, Harriet Mountford made the very most of every opportunity Mozart had given her, and her sense of phrasing, style, and purity of sound were delightful. This was possibly the most successful movement of the entire evening, to which the orchestra contributed some exceptional ensemble playing and the chorus were relaxed, warm, and sympathetic in tone.

The great interest of the evening was undoubtedly the performance of the Requiem Mass in C minor by Michael Haydn, Joseph's younger brother. Well known for his church music, for which he was regarded in his own day as much, if not more so than his older brother, this particular work was quite unknown to your reviewer, and probably to every member of the audience. Certainly the choir members had never performed the work before, so this was a journey of exploration for the entire congregation in Axminster church. Again the music was absolutely and traditionally of its time and type. Michael produced no liturgical or musical surprises for us.

But what was interesting and surprising, was how good this work was. I am not sure that one would ever quite mistake it for a mature work by Joseph, but one could hear why Michael's contemporaries so highly regarded him, including his own brother, who was known to hand on to him commissions which he was too busy, or found uncongenial, to compose. Mozart, too, held Michael in high regard, as did Salieri, Beethoven and Cherubini. The Choral Society in their performance made an excellent and persuasive case that this work should be performed more regularly and be much better known. The chorus is undoubtedly the star of the show, there is scarcely a page of the score where they do not appear, and the team of soloists are again treated much as a semi-chorus, with relatively few individual moments to shine. They certainly combined as a well-matched team.

The chorus and orchestra seemed to take a moment or two to get in their stride, (although that may be the fault of your reviewer, who was sat in a poor position for hearing for the first half of the programme.) But once settled, the chorus sang with assurance and conviction, and gave a whole-hearted and committed account of this interesting work, encouraged with her usual energy and enthusiasm by Judy Martin as visiting 'Guest Conductor'. It was a work which suited the Society well. It is to be hoped that Axminster's lead will be followed by other choral societies in the area, who will also be encouraged to schedule this work for performance.

The programme was completed by one of Mozart's Epistle Sonatas. Peter Parshall played organ continuo, not only for this work, but throughout the programme, displaying his musicality and technique, and it is because of his careful preparation of the chorus during the term that the success of the evening was assured. The Society is to be congratulated on a good concert, and now they have explored one unknown Requiem, this Reviewer hopes that they may be encouraged to take on the case of Cherubini's Requiem, which also is far too infrequently performed. It is similarly a fine work containing delightful music. On this showing, it will be well within the Society's capabilities.

F. E. Burroughes.