

ROSSINI: PETITE MESSE SOLONELLE

The programme notes for the Choral Society's November performance in the Minster told us all we wished to know about this little known work and its flamboyant composer, Rossini. The Mass was written originally for twelve voices, accompanied by two pianos and a harmonium; the orchestration followed some years later. The notes added, quite rightly, that this extensive sacred work is neither small nor solemn. Musical Director Judy Martin, for whom all words of praise are inadequate, inspires the members of the choir to achieve standards of performance hitherto unimagined. To this end, she invites musicians of the highest quality, singers and instrumentalists with whom she has worked in her illustrious musical career, to perform as soloists. For this performance they came from north, south, east and west, from England and from Ireland. It is a rare treat for Axminster to welcome performers of such international renown. The choir was accompanied by piano and harmonium, as originally scored by Rossini.

From the opening bars of the first movement, the Kyrie, it was clear that a dramatic interpretation of the Mass was to follow, with Rossini the composer of operas using rhythms and dynamics to full effect. The choir deserves high praise for its response to the conductor's direction, good diction and close attention to precise entrances, especially in the 100 or so bars of (Amen's) in the Cum Sancto Spiritu which brought the first section to a close at a romping pace. It was so brisk, lively and yet under perfect control - a joy to listen to. The soloists were introduced in the Gloria, together and separately.

The audience was captivated: a baritone (Julian Rippon) with deep resonance; tenor (David Watkin-Holmes) with glorious high register; alto (Laura Lamph) whose rich and silky voice matched the lustre of her lovely gown; and a sparkling soprano (Harriet Mountford) with a voice like crystal. The soprano/alto duet Qui Tollis was especially lovely, each watching and listening to the other, making wonderful music. The Credo is a marathon, especially for the virtuoso pianist – and for his page turner who had scarcely time to sit down.

Three of the four movements featured one of Rossini's favourite combinations, the quartet. In the opening movement the choir alternated with the quartet, beginning and ending with strong affirmation of belief in chorus, interwoven with lyrical passages from the four soloists. The one solo movement of the second half was pure magic – the Crucifixus expressively sung by the soprano with perfect accompaniment from the harmonium. It is said that when the fugue comes in the audience goes out: not on this occasion! The closing movement of the Credo is a fugue on a grand scale and Judy set the choir a cracking tempo which they tackled most competently. Exciting to listen to, amazing to witness – no wonder the audience broke into spontaneous applause at the final chord.

Next followed an unusual introduction, a solo piece for the piano, Preludio Religioso, to be played during the Offertory of the Mass, allowing everyone except the indefatigable pianist time to take breath. And then another new experience, a choral setting of O Salutaris Hostia, the Communion anthem, for sixteen voices. Joining the soloists were the pianist and harmonium player, their page turners, and chosen members of the chorus. Performed unaccompanied, this was chamber choral music at its best. The remainder of the Mass was in traditional form: Sanctus & Benedictus with atmospheric introduction on the harmonium; a soprano solo of O Salutaris floating effortlessly over the high notes; finishing with the Agnus Dei, the solo part sung so expressively by the alto that she held the audience in rapt attention.

Throughout the whole performance, the part played by the pianist, Miles Lallemand, cannot be praised highly enough – supporting the singers, providing the atmosphere of each piece in turn. He and his fellow accompanist, Peter Parshall on harmonium, and their stalwart assistants, David Milsom and John Mountford, deserved their prolonged applause. As the words of the last line of the Mass ended and the final chord was played *fff* on the instruments, the appreciation of the audience was loud, long and heartfelt. Congratulations to Judy for a brilliant production. The Vicar said that perhaps the Minster had not heard such wonderful music before everyone agreed. Sydie Bones