

Baroque to Modern concert by Epsom Chamber Choir

1 April 2025



Epsom & Ewell is fortunate to have many excellent music and drama groups to join, learn and perform with, and for audiences to enjoy old favourites or explore something unfamiliar and perhaps a bit challenging.

This lovely concert by Epsom Chamber Choir gave us contrasting styles from the 17th, 18th, 20th and 21st centuries, all with a meditative quality. Good programme notes were helpful.

In the fantastic acoustic of St. Martin's Church one was immersed in the spacious depths of the sounds; the intensity produced several spine-tingling moments for me.

The choir opened with *I was glad when they said unto me* - not the familiar setting used at King Charles' coronation in 2023 (which is by Parry) but one written by Henry Purcell for the coronation of James II in 1685. It sets off in a joyful dance. The top part floated over the others in a plea for peace and it drew to an exultant finish in a wish for *world without end*.

Purcell's style is perhaps less familiar to us today than Bach's, so it was great to hear three more pieces which showed his skill in dramatic and plangent composition, and the choir's skill in their performance. My notes on *Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts* and *Hear my prayer, O Lord say sublime and understated intense anguish* - sounds which produced more delightful shivers up the spine.

Then to compare them with Bach across four pieces - in these there were stately dance rhythms and delicacy as befitted some of the words. *Fürchte dich nicht* (Do not fear, I am near you), probably written for a funeral (it's a pity we don't know who commissioned the work), seemed to demonstrate all the complexities which Bach could write in a short piece. I hadn't heard this before, but it did not sound an easy sing!

In Arvo Pärt's *The Deer's Cry*, written in 2008, the dynamics, sonority and breath were beautifully controlled in some very exposed writing, then the very long lines of John Tavener's *Funeral Ikos* were effortlessly phrased.

Three short modern pieces followed - John Tavener's *A Hymn to the Mother of God*, James Macmillan's *A Child's Prayer* (dedicated to the 16 children and their teacher who were killed at Dunblane in March 1996), and Eric Whitacre's *Lux Aurumque* (*Light and Gold*, which was introduced as representing light falling through stained glass) - they were full of space, profound, resonant and uplifting.

In the baroque pieces the choir of just over 30 singers had a light accompaniment on chamber organ and cello. Poppy Walshaw, the cellist, also played three movements from the Bach cello suites. This was more music to get lost inside, the two dances leading us into a celebration of life in the joyous *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf* (*The spirit comes to help our weakness*) to conclude a most enjoyable evening.

Upcoming Events

The choir is holding a **Come & Sing! Haydn's *The Creation* on Saturday 10th May, 1.30-5pm, at St. Martin's Junior School, Ashley Road KT18 7AD (£10, students £5, under 18s free - includes music hire and light refreshments).**

Their next concert, **'The Food of Love'**, is a choral tapestry ranging from 16th-century fun, through *West Side Story*, *I Got Rhythm* and *Summertime*, to Billy Joel - **Saturday 28th June, 7.30pm, St. Martin's Church, Epsom KT17 4PX.**

Anita Littler