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Epsom Choral Society Delivers a Classical Delight at St Martin’s Church

17 March 2025



March is concert season at St Martin’s Church, Epsom. Between Ashtead Choral Society on the 8th and Epsom Chamber Choir on the 29th, Epsom Choral Society took their turn on March 15th, with a programme of two favourite pieces from the classical period, performed just the way everybody likes them.

Haydn’s *Mass in Time of Troubles*, nicknamed in honour of Lord Nelson, has its moments of subtlety and reflection, but when the string orchestra and solo quartet get augmented with trumpets and timpani, it needs a full choral society sound to rise above it and deliver the dramatic moments too.

Conductor Julian Collings likes tempi fast, making the most of the English Sinfonietta, whose string players’ fingers moved so perfectly together they could have been attached to a giant pantograph. That meant the singers, too, had to know their parts thoroughly beforehand—well enough to keep up with the speed of both cascades of notes and a whole booklet of Latin words.

Mozart’s *Solemn Vespers* covers five whole psalms before the more familiar text of *Magnificat*, and the words span many human experiences—from justice, compassion, and almsgiving to footstools and skulls. Their weekly practices for the two preceding months had been well spent.

The piece they knew best was the bijou motet *Ave Verum Corpus*, which they all sang from memory. That meant they could rise and fall musically as one instrument and stay together during the conductor’s extensive *rallentando* between the two stanzas. The odd forgotten note length matters not at all when the ensemble improves by a leap.

Hearing pieces as familiar as *Ave Verum Corpus* or *Laudate Dominum*, the fifth of those *Vespers* psalms, I am reminded of other times I’ve heard or sung them myself. Next time I hear *Laudate Dominum*, I shall enjoy being reminded of this performance. Eleanor Pennell-Briggs’ soprano voice has a liquid agility that nourishes every note. Meanwhile, the accompanying choral forces took care to supply the harmony without ever being overpowering.

However easy they were for the listener, these classical-period works pose challenges for the singer. At some distance from the conductor, the basses and tenors did well to keep up with his faster tempi. Everyone had to contend with tricks like tuning odd intervals in the many fugal passages, singing on the beat while the orchestra played off it, or vice versa, and at times, half the choir having to sing a whole movement a few beats behind the other half.

The opening Haydn motet *Insanae et Vanae Curae* was the only appearance of the main church organ, played by Peter Jaekel. He found some rich and sonorous colours during the outer sections. I always enjoy his playing, but the choir couldn’t quite match his volume. They wisely had to keep enough in reserve for the longer pieces to follow.

Near the end of the *Nelson Mass* is a minor-key *Benedictus* movement, with martial trumpets and drums. I was glad to hear the sopranos still had the power to confidently scale past the top of the clef, wholly in the spirit of a ‘time of troubles.’ Likewise, the altos were prepared for some telling moments in the concluding movement of the Creed.

The other three soloists had less chance for display than the soprano. Gavin Horsley sang a prayerful *Qui tollis*, asking gently for Jesus’ mercy. Beth Moxon demonstrated that she could keep projecting even at the lower realms of a mezzo’s range. In brief solo moments, Paul Hopwood showed signs that he would be comfortable in an even larger venue than St Martin’s Church. All showed delightful awareness of the others during ensemble moments.

The concert ended with Helen Phillips, the choir’s chairman, thanking the audience for providing the motivation that prompted the musicians to put the effort in, taking great pains to make it sound easy. It was a duty I, and all in the building, were very happy to perform.

Nigel Williams

Photo: Epsom Choral Society at St Martin’s Church. Credit Clive Richardson

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