

# Epsom Choral Society's Verdi Requiem reviewed

28 November 2024



I will never forget the first time I heard **Verdi's** Requiem. That crashing wall of sound that was the *Dies Irae* filled me with fear and awe. It seemed as if the mouth of hell had been opened and nothing could stop the all-consuming fire. And here on offer from **Epsom Choral Society** is this mighty work, accompanied by only five instruments. Would it work? I couldn't wait to find out.

The choir started off solemnly setting the scene. Their warm-hearted singing incorporated a range of colours - from a luminous 'et lux perpetua' to a firmness of purpose in 'te decet hymnus'. The four soloists also made an impressive appearance with their fugal 'Kyrie'.

Then came the 'Dies Irae'. Such was the spirit of the choir as they hurled their phrases at us that it was hard to believe there were not twice the number of singers on stage. This was fearless and exciting singing. With alternating timpani and bass drum replicating the original scoring, we were wholly immersed in fire and brimstone.

In addition to the high octane 'Dies Irae', the choir is given other saner but even more challenging fare, such as the fugue for 2 choirs in 'Sanctus'. Here, ECS was nimble and assured, keeping the texture light, transparent and a joy to listen to. The concluding movement 'Libera me' is a balancing companion to the 'Sanctus', demanding equally tight control to prevent any section from charging off the rails. Such hair raising moments showed the true mettle of ECS in their ability to conquer details, keep a clear head and ride the storm.

What a fabulous quartet of fine young soloists. All performed magnificently and immeasurably added to the enjoyment of the evening. There were simply too many superlative moments, the following being a cruelly curtailed list.

Soprano **Elisabeth Findon's** impassioned singing during the concluding 'Libera me' was a highlight of the evening. Her high Bb near the end - a true pianississimo (*pppp*) - floated above a muted chorus; it was translucent and sublime and a moment to remember. 'Quid sum miser' was exquisitely sung by mezzo Judy Louie Brown. It was accompanied by the marimba - an unexpectedly successful substitute for solo bassoon in the original score, and especially notable this evening for both percussionists duetting on the one instrument!

John Findon is a commanding tenor. He was majestic in the opening of the 'Kyrie', and tenderly sensuous in 'Qui Mariam'. **Mark Nathan's** cantabile bass solo 'Voca me' showed off Verdi's song-writing skill at its most natural and beautiful. And whenever the four of them joined forces to sing as an ensemble, at times *a cappella*, they always added colour, sparkle and emotion to the drama. I came out from the concert knowing that the haunting 'Lacrymosa' will be my *Ohrwurm* for weeks to come.

Verdi's Requiem is universally adored. That this wonderful work can be accessible to local choirs with smaller forces at their disposal is thanks to Berlin musician, **Michael Betzner-Brandt**, who has miraculously reduced the massed orchestral requirements to an ingenious chamber ensemble of piano, horn, double bass, marimba (plus big bass drum) and timpani. Yes, there are moments that are hard to replicate, such as the antiphonal trumpets in the 'Tuba mirum', but they are a very small price to pay for what has been gained.

Lynda Chang

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