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Northern Lights up Epsom

2 July 2024



At their "**Mass in Blue**" concert Saturday 29th June, St Martins Church, Epsom, the **Epsom Chamber Choir** succeeded once again in enhancing their reputation for exciting performances of adventurous programmes.

The evening kicked off with "**Northern Light**s" by the contemporary Latvian composer, **Ēriks Ešenvalds**, and saw the choir placed unusually in the chancel, rather than in their customary position nearer the audience in the transept. This meant that their entrance was not greeted by the usual applause, as the audience hadn't realised that they had arrived! After a vigorous opening, the reason for this placing became apparent as the piece employs tuned wine glasses and chimes which need to be supported – the choir stalls being ideal.

Ešenvalds uses this unusual instrumentation to produce a sustained shimmering sound which underscores the choir particularly effectively in the quieter passages. A timely work for us in the UK, having recently been treated to magical displays of the Northern Lights!

The choir returned to their normal positions for "Stargazer" by the contemporary British composer, **Alec Roth**. His style recalls Holst's and Britten's – especially the Flower Songs – and the choir showed some wonderful legato singing in the shifting harmonic colours.

Vocalist **Maddie Martin** and the **LJ Jazz Trio** then provided us with a jazzy interlude, and the first half of the concert concluded with another contemporary British composer, **Jonathan Dove** and his "The Passing of the Year". These seven, contrasting part-songs – stunningly accompanied by choir member, virtuoso pianist **Stephen Ridge** – gave the choir the chance to display their convincing mastery of complex and quirky rhythms, and cool and hot tone clusters.

The second half of the concert was given over to "Mass in Blue" by a third contemporary British composer, Will Todd. While not a personal favourite, this exciting setting of the mass has gained huge popularity across the choral world. The blues scale permeates the whole work but the choir immediately seemed fully "in the groove", secure and quite at ease with the challenging blues harmonies and rhythms.

At times, some were unable to resist the urge for spontaneous swaying! Singing almost as a complex backing group to the jazz trio and vocalist, the choir was able to show off its skill with sensitive phrasing and highly effective dynamic contrasts. A convincing performance of a welcome addition to the repertoire.

Nick Landauer

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