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St Martin’s journey from darkness to light

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Ashtead Choral Society and Kent Sinfonia – Dvořák Triumph. St Martin’s Church Epsom 24th May.

Let me get straight to the point. This was a special evening and, at least for me, unexpectedly so. Dvořák’s *Romance for Violin* and his *Stabat Mater* are very much ‘B-list’ on the concert repertoire and don’t feature on the Classic FM ‘Hall of Fame’. You must wonder why when the performance by Ashtead Choral Society, Kent Sinfonia, and Christian Halstead on solo violin was so enthralling from start to finish.

Halstead set the tone for the evening with Dvořák’s restless *Romance for Violin*. You might expect a straight love song from the title ‘Romance’, but Halstead made the most of this restive paean to foreshadow what was to come.

Now, the *Stabat Mater*. It is one of those pieces that is, to my mind, not very interesting when listened to as a recording. But, wow! It comes to life in a performance setting, as Music Director Dr Andrew Storey demonstrated, navigating the orchestra, soloists, and choir through Dvořák’s journey from darkness to light.

Each movement is compelling, and on Saturday night in Epsom it felt like reading a great book. As each chapter ended, I wanted to get on to the next one and find out what happens next. There is too much to write about in this review, but to give you a flavour: we were treated to solo quartets that felt appropriately ‘cathedral’ rather than ‘opera house’; soprano and alto choruses that sparkled; tenor and bass choruses plucked from the depths of Bohemia; and, oh, the magical end where Storey closes with 140 performers quietly triumphing over tragedy.

This concert was a very good end to the Ashtead Choral Society season. But there is good news: if you missed this concert and want to experience Dvořák’s *Stabat Mater* for yourself, Epsom Choral Society will be performing it next season. Even better news: Ashtead Choral Society’s next season will include a mouth-watering line-up: Elgar’s *Dream of Gerontius*, Bach’s *St John Passion*, and Handel’s (rarely performed oratorio) *Theodora*.

www.ashtead.choralsociety.org.uk

Jane Pickles, 26 May 2025

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