

Bournemouth Bach Choir, conducted by their Musical Director Tim Hooper, gave a passionate performance on Saturday in Christchurch Priory of choral music by Parry and Vaughan Williams, with orchestral music by Walton and Elgar, including *Nimrod* played in memory of the Choir's founder, Maureen Gibson, who died earlier this year. Without Maureen's contribution as administrator and patron, over many years, the Choir would not be in the strong position it occupies now in the musical life of the area. Her legacy was displayed amply at this fine concert, supported by a capacity audience.

A spirited reading of Walton's *Crown Imperial* paid tribute to the Queen's birthday. There was a keen, rhythmic tautness to the performance and the superb brass section showed its full colours in the resonant acoustic of the Priory Church. *Nimrod* was allowed to flow without losing any of the music's eloquence or, on this occasion, its poignancy. Perhaps it would have marked the memorial intention more fully if there had been no applause here? This generous and well-balanced programme continued with a warm rendering of Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens* in which the Choir, always punching above its weight, sang truly *in perfect diapason*. Even Parry's finest music can sound ponderous in over-zealous hands, yet under Tim Hooper's control the architecture of the music was clear.

The main work in the programme was *A Sea Symphony* by Vaughan Williams, written over a period of six years to texts by Walt Whitman, becoming the composer's first of a total of nine symphonies. The work is truly a choral symphony, as the excellent (anonymous) programme notes stated, and although on just three occasions the orchestra threatened to overwhelm the chorus, they managed to 'shake out every sail', risking the ship, themselves and all to produce a choral display of great verve and spirit. Intonation was sure in the unaccompanied moments, most notably amongst the semi-chorus in the fourth movement and the all-important text came across clearly at most points - '. . . away O soul! Haul out . . .' however was lost to the thirty-foot waves of the orchestra! The opening of the third movement was especially crisp and clear, assisted by discreet doubled horns.

Eleanor Dennis and Morgan Pearse provided the soprano and baritone solos, bringing a full operatic character to bear on their rôles, totally suited to the ebullience and demands of the solo writing. Their duet in the fourth movement '*O we can wait no longer*' showed them at one with the music and each other's voices, so that Whitman's bringing together of the physical journey over the myriad waves and life's journey through '*the regions infinite*'

made for an effective consummation of the whole work. The first solo soprano entry at '*Flaunt out O sea*' in the opening movement provided a rigorous call to arms for the chorus and from that point on Eleanor Dennis's contribution was always vital, yet her fullest tone was nicely tempered by a wide dynamic range and expressive colour. Morgan Pearse showed sensitivity in the beautiful Nocturne '*On the beach at night alone*', at the opening of which the semi-chorus weaved a magical halo around the soloist's phrases. He was the master of the declamatory sections, such as '*And out of these a chant for the sailors of all nations*' in the first movement and kept some of his powder dry for the '*reckless soul*' and '*sail forth!*' moments before the close.

Tim Hooper directed his forces in the Vaughan Williams with energy and understanding, bringing intelligence to bear on what can seem to be, in less-experienced hands, an over-written piece. Tempo changes were executed deftly and the pace of each new section was ably judged so that there was an organic feel to the whole. Bravi to Bournemouth Bach Choir and Orchestra for bringing the sea so vividly to life and for commemorating so thoroughly the life and dedication of their Founder, the musician Maureen Gibson.

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