

CONCERT REVIEW: The Garleton Singers

Bernstein, Sharpe and Copland - Sunday 15 March 2015 at St Mary's Church, Haddington.

A "Feast of American Music" was how this concert, on Sunday evening 15th March 2015 in St Mary's Haddington, was labelled - and so it proved, a veritable banquet!

In a cleverly constructed programme, the large audience at St Mary's was offered music both familiar and new, both sacred and popular. It was a huge sing for the choir, especially as the concert had been given in Edinburgh, at Greyfriars Kirk, the previous evening. And, at their best, they gave us a breadth of sound entirely appropriate for the vast landscapes and cultural diversity that is the States.

Opening the programme was an organ transcription of Copland's justly famous Fanfare for the Common Man after which the choir gave us three songs from Copland's Old American Songs. The breath control from the women in the third song, *Long Time Ago*, was particularly impressive and, as we moved to the familiar territory of Bernstein's *West Side Story*, was also in evidence in a wonderful rendition of *One Hand, One Heart. Old Man River* from Jerome Kern's Showboat followed, featuring the choir's basses, and was very affecting.

The choir's accompanist, George Wilson, sparkled at the piano in three of Gershwin's piano pieces, finishing his tour-de-force with the iconic *I Got Rhythm*.

The choir's familiarity with two of the spirituals from Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* paid dividends. Sung from memory, they were indeed memorably thrilling. Strange then that, to my ears, Tippett's arrangements sound so European in style, contrasting with all the American composers in the programme.

Then we came to a composer who was new to me - Carlyle Sharpe - a music professor from Missouri in his fiftieth year. His *Missa Brevis* sounded very well crafted, with a beautiful melody for the *Agnus Dei* and a lively, engaging *Sanctus* that was very pleasant on the ear.

The second half of the concert opened with Bernstein's tricky *Warm-up*, after which we returned to Carlyle Sharpe and his exciting *Laudate Nomen*. Rhythmic and incisive singing, with a great organ accompaniment, left us with a strong crystal sound - very satisfying. Less so was his *Toccata* for Organ which lost my interest fairly early on. Morten Lauridsen's most famous piece *O magnum mysterium* was next. A test of sustained phrasing and pitching was perhaps a little hurried for the St Mary's acoustic and the music's mood of awe and wonder.

And so to Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. It was an exciting performance, full of rhythmic energy and contrasts. The accompaniment, incisively now from harp and percussion as well as organ, added greatly to the effect. Terrific solos from choir soloists were topped only by a beautiful rendition of Psalm 23 from 12 year old Charlie Bell.

For any choir, singing in Hebrew is always going to present challenges to the non-native speaker and The Garleton Singers coped admirably. A suitably big sound to conclude our American feast and send us home with a rhythmic spring in our step.

The Garleton's next appearance in St Mary's Haddington - on Monday 25th May - precedes their visit to Munich in June, for which Carlyle Sharpe is adding a Kyrie to his Missa Brevis. We wish them well.

John Stone
16 March 2015