

BEDFORD CHORAL SOCIETY ST. PAUL'S CHURCH 19TH MARCH 2011

REVIEW by DEIRDRE KNIGHT and PAUL EDWARDS

A serious programme, with much lovely music, including two Requiems of markedly different idioms; and whilst we have quite a few adverse criticisms to offer, these are made in a constructive spirit and in full awareness of the difficulties faced by the performers. We both felt that there was a problem of choir seating – the layout and venue being difficult for a chorus of 113 singers, and the balance of parts was affected. Ian Smith conducted from a very elevated position in the hope that the whole choir could see his beat – this was, as ever, excellent – his customary skill and sensitivity were never in doubt, and his choice of tempi likewise ideal. Possibly because of sighting problems, or acoustic issues, there were a number of occasions – particularly in the Duruflé – when not all the singers were “with the beat”. It would seem desirable that the strongest and most confident members of each section (S.A.T.B.) be positioned at the front of the chorus in this difficult venue, and we felt both visually and aurally that this was not the case.

Both the guest soloists were excellent. The baritone Dawid Kimberg communicated the Vaughan Williams Mystical Songs with real commitment and exemplary diction; and Stephanie Marshall sang the two Mahler songs with charm and beautiful tone-colour (though some might find it hard to accept such masculine love-songs being sung by a soprano!). The accompanist Tim Grant-Jones was top-quality – most of all in the first two Mystical Songs where he drew delectable tone-colours from the piano and demonstrated his fine technique and sympathy with these lovely pieces.

The rarity in the programme was Rheinberger's D minor Requiem – a real pleasure to hear this warmly harmonious and melodious work. It was felt that the programme should have included the titles and texts of the various movements, as we heard it said that members of the audience were unsure as to where we were – no indication being given as to how many sections there were and the words being mostly inaudible, alas.

The keys of D minor and F major are notoriously difficult for good choral intonation, and we noticed a number of places where the tenors and basses were flat. The organist helpfully increased dynamic volume as the work progressed which gave the choir better support, but it is – of course – a very unforgiving instrument and poor tuning shows up badly! There was also some strain in the higher tessituras particularly in the penultimate movement, but some effective and well-varied dynamics in the final one.

Many of us felt what a good idea the short interval was, without the (often interminable) refreshments.

Turning to the Duruflé Requiem: the choir had obviously worked hard to learn this exceptionally beautiful but extremely difficult work. We felt this difficulty this difficulty was severely compounded by having to sing from vocal scores with no accompaniment printed. For a work whose idiom is so far removed from what the chorus members would normally be at home with, and with so many changes of time

signature and irregular rhythms, this seems to us a serious error at the administrative stage. Many mistakes, hesitations, wrong entries and faulty ensemble can be laid at the door of this matter. Furthermore, if the singers had been able to see the extraordinary difficulty and extreme complexity of the organ accompaniment, they would have been even more aware of how essential it is at all times to keep with the beat. We could see how clear and how sympathetic Ian Smith's conducting was at every stage. As the Requiem proceeded, the choir was evidently tiring (understandably!) and the observance of dynamics, blend and (most of all) intonation started to decline. The organ part was played with great skill and understanding by James Sherlock. He produced many colourful registrations from the as-yet unfinished church organ, only the massive Great Open Diapason coming across much too strongly at various points. Despite all these rather negative matters, we were very glad to hear these fine choral works live in our home town, and we thank and congratulate those who made such an effort to bring it all to pass.

D.C.K. & P.C.E.