

Bedford Choral Society at the 2010 Bedford Proms in Twinwood Arena

Bedford Choral Society made their fourteenth appearance at Bedford Proms with conductor Stephen Bell. The arena was specially dug out by the Twinwood owner, David Gooding, and so is a perfect bowl for the audience. The special guest was the utterly enchanting and very successful Faryl Smith. She is still only 15 years of age but her voice gave me goosebumps. Her fine frocks, one per song, were very glamorous but I was concerned about the tightness of the bodices and her diaphragm still being able to move. Her request to the audience to say "cheese" while she took their photograph because "my nana wants a photo for her scrapbook" was very nicely done.

The weather leading up to the day had been very changeable, so we had been advising our audience members to bring warm, waterproof clothes with additional umbrellas. On the day, it rained while people were patiently queuing to enter the arena, but magically cleared up at 6 pm as they finally were allowed to enter. Sunshine then dried the ground. The evening was fine but rather cold. Stephen Bell was his usual energetic and charismatic self, ensuring the London Gala Orchestra's players demonstrated their professionalism.

The small stage required a reduced orchestra which was then tightly packed with our 42 singers, especially during the rain when the violins had to move inwards to keep dry. The cosy arrangements meant I was mesmerised by the flying broken string on the nearest violin. I also had a close view of the excellent harpist re-stringing his instrument mid-633 squadron. I had not previously realised 633 Squadron had a harp in it. We had feared uncomfortable chairs in this new venue, but were pleased to find some very plush, if a little dusty, chairs had been found for us. The lovely surprise was the sound and lighting being supervised by Marcello from the Corn Exchange. For the first time, we were mixed properly and could be heard by the audience over the lively orchestra.

Our "Hallelujah chorus" by Handel was the second piece and set a magisterial tone. Faryl made people cry when she sang "Somewhere" from West Side Story. We compounded the sentimental mood, singing Verdi's "Va Pensiero", the captives' song. During the rehearsal, Stephen had pointed out we seemed entirely too happy, considering we were supposed to be pining for our homeland, so we were suitably downtrodden in the performance.

We began the second half with Zadok the Priest at a splendid pace. Several very young people near the stage were transfixed, paying full attention to the music. Others were imitating Stephen's movements to conduct us. Faryl explained she had been classically trained which continued to influence her choice of music, hence singing Gounod's "Ave Maria". This piece had impressed her judges during "Britain's Got Talent". I had wondered why the orchestra had suggested Polovtsian Dances as an orchestral piece. We had asked to sing with them, so during rehearsal, I realised why the piece was chosen, despite the limited number of players. The orchestra's organiser, Wilf Goddard, had a very fine duet on his clarinet, with the flute player sitting beside him. Stephen was most amused that the men had agreed to sing the words of the

Great Khan when he offered the women captives (sopranos and altos) to his male guests “for their pleasure”.

The classic Proms pieces were exciting to watch. Audience members were determined to keep pace with the fastest version of the “Hornpipe”, while the choir members were clapping perfectly in time. Twirling umbrellas, waving flags, flashing red antennae, whirling light sticks and even swinging lanterns encouraged audience efforts in singing “Jerusalem” and “Land of Hope and Glory” with repeats. During the rehearsal, Faryl had been concerned when she discovered we would not be singing the verses of Rule Britannia with her, since she was “not sure she could remember the words”. She had absorbed them perfectly by the performance. The splendour of the fireworks had to be deduced from the audience’s upturned faces, together with the odd falling ember.

Our regular concerts have made choir members work hard and we are very grateful that choir members remain with us over the summer. We are lucky to have patient guidance from Ian Smith and Tim Grant-Jones as well as their energy and persistent encouragement to improve our techniques. Choir members assure me they enjoy our contribution to spreading the idea that classical music can be fun.

Paula Grayson

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