

The War Requiem at Tewkesbury Abbey, 23rd June 2018

A review by Simon Park

The Burford Singers

English Arts Chorale

Choristers of Bristol Cathedral

Linda Richardson – *Soprano*

James Gilchrist – *Tenor*

Quentin Hayes – *Baritone*

English Arts Orchestra

Conductors – Brian Kay, Leslie Olive

“My subject is war and the pity of war”, wrote Wilfred Owen, whose anger at the sheer futility of what he had witnessed in the trenches of northern France was the catalyst for some of the finest poetry to emerge from the wreckage of the First World War. For Benjamin Britten, an avowed pacifist, it had a particular resonance and inspired him to compose one of the greatest oratorios of the 20th (or, indeed, any other) century.

Commissioned to mark the opening of the new cathedral in Coventry (built to replace its 14th-century predecessor, which was obliterated by the Luftwaffe in 1940), the War Requiem combined Owen’s poetry with Latin texts from the Missa pro Defunctis. Scored for a full symphony orchestra, separate chamber orchestra, large mixed choir, smaller boys’ choir and three soloists, it presents enormous challenges both technically and acoustically.

For Brian Kay, the two performances, at Winchester Cathedral on 9th June and Tewkesbury Abbey two weeks later, were the fulfilment of a 55-year ambition. “It’s something I’d always wanted to conduct”, he says. “I listened to the first performance in 1962, at school, and then we performed it, only three years later, with Britten, at King’s [College] Cambridge. I fell in love with it completely”.

A casual chat, some years ago, between members of both of the choirs involved, about a possible joint venture, finally led to the realisation of Brian’s dream. Originally planned, in 2014, to coincide with the centenary of the Battle of the Somme (in 2016), it was soon re-scheduled since, as Brian puts it, “Two years just wasn’t enough. Something as complex as this needs a lot of preparation”. In fact, 2018 was arguably an even more appropriate centennial year, marking both the end of the Great War and the life of Wilfred Owen.

The sheer number of performers precluded the use of Burford church; whilst conversely, of the two venues chosen, Winchester Cathedral is, in Brian’s words, “Almost too big, with the longest nave in the country”. Tewkesbury’s exquisite Abbey Church of St Mary the Virgin, however, was the perfect compromise – big enough to accommodate the performers within not-too live an acoustic environment.

In fact, the 'sound' was wonderful, and it was an evening none of those there will forget. The War Requiem packs a punch matched by very few other large-scale choral works. The variety in sound, dynamics and texture it offers is a counterpart to its challenging subject matter, and the result is awe-inspiring. So, too, was the performance that night. The musical language, whilst considered passé half a century ago by some of the more fervid early-'60s 'modernists', is nonetheless still quite challenging to ears perhaps more attuned to music of the 18th or 19th centuries.

And the choral writing makes serious demands of an amateur choir. But The Burford Singers and English Arts Chorale together rose to the occasion magnificently; and in this respect they were matched by everyone involved. The use of two conductors is not uncommon practice with this piece and worked seamlessly here. In fact, there were three if you include Mark Lee, directing the Bristol choristers. Whether Britten would have approved of the mix of boys and girls here is conjectural; but they sounded suitably ethereal and angelic, invisible from the nave behind the main chorus, in the chancel (or 'quire', as it is known here).

The orchestra, drawn largely from the ranks of the Royal Philharmonic, was as good as you would expect of such a pedigree. The score calls for considerable dexterity, skill and concentration from all concerned; but from the blazing, pin-you-to-the-seat, *fortissimo* brass fanfares of the 'Dies Irae' to the softest of passages, via the myriad complexities of metre and rhythm with which Britten confronts them, they emerged triumphant.

The three soloists similarly shone. The two men in some ways have the easier job, being accompanied by the chamber orchestra, whilst the soprano has to hold her own against the bigger band. But all three were magnificent, the spine-tingling interplay of soprano ('Lacrimosa') and tenor ('Move him into the sun...') in the closing passage of the 'Dies Irae' almost defying you to breathe.

Likewise, the final moments of the whole work, where Owen's 'Strange Meeting' between two soldiers, enemies, who died together ('let us sleep now...') foreshadows 'In paradisum' – 'into paradise may the Angels lead thee'. This is music of heart-stopping beauty, preparing us for the final *a capella* 'Requiescant in pace', its amorphous F-sharp-inclined tonality leading us to that final, blissful F-major chord. Peace at last.

For Brian, it was the end of a long and, at times, difficult journey. Two performances of a work of this size entail huge organizational and logistical problems; but the will to get the job done was there, and get it done they did. Brian is fulsome in his praise of the Burford Singers: "They did a fantastic job, and the great thing for me was that they grew to love it. They sang it quite wonderfully – I'm extremely proud of them. I'm thrilled we did it". So are we all.

SIMON PARK