

Octavo, Ivor Gurney Hall, 23 February 2020

On paper, the programme for Octavo's concert appeared extremely daunting. Featuring music by no less than seventeen composers, the eight-piece choir seemed to have set themselves the sternest of tests, not least in terms of stamina. However, as it turned out, the programme was well-paced and the singers showed no signs of running out of breath. Neither did the audience run out of steam, as the anecdotal introductions given by various members of the choir to each sequence of songs greatly aided our appreciation of them.

The first sequence was supplied by composers of Shakespeare's era, namely: Thomas Tomkins, William Byrd, John Bennett and Thomas Weelkes. The songs were a mixture of motets and madrigals, confidently sung by the choir. With excellent enunciation and secure intonation it was always apparent where the voices entered, led or followed according to the writer's wishes.

Coming closer to our own time, two profound pieces by James MacMillan and the late John Tavener proved to be the highlight of the first half of Octavo's concert. MacMillan's 'O Radiant Dawn' is one of the Scottish composer's Strathclyde Motets, and its declamatory iteration of the title is as much an expression of defiance as joy. Tavener's 'Mother of God, Here I Stand', an anthem from his epic 'Veil of the Temple' from 2003, is equally powerful, underpinned by extreme low notes in the bass register. Kenneth Roles took on the role of basso profundo for the purpose, and was exceedingly effective.

The choir divided into two groups of four for Britten's 'A Hymn to the Virgin', and placed themselves at the front and back of the hall. The smaller choirs then shared musical phrases in a call and response that at times resembled an echo. Such antiphonal writing has been used since the time of Monteverdi, but it never fails to mesmerise with its charms.

The last two pieces of the first half contrasted sacred and secular, first through Herbert Howells' setting of words by Walter de la Mare, and then a madrigal-of-sorts by William Byrd.

Part two began with a run of quintessentially English songs by Ireland, Finzi and Britten once more. They were followed by three songs from 'Six Early Part Songs' by Delius, though their origin might not have been revealed from their musical language or the fact they were sung in German. A curious collection indeed.

Lighter fare then came in the form of songs by Pearsall and Quilter, interspersed with John Rutter's jazzy take on Shakespeare's 'It Was a Lover and His Lass' for female voices, and Bairstow's robust 'Music When Soft Voices Die' for male voices.

'Lisa Lan', a wistful Welsh folk-song arranged by Gustav Holst led nicely onto two concluding pieces by Vaughan Williams: 'The Cloud Capp'd Towers' and 'Linden Lea'. Octavo ended with Finzi's 'My Spirit Sang All Day' – a fitting encore to this splendid concert which, in the event, proved not to be daunting at all.