

## BARNES 2018: Growth of a Festival

In the first Barnes Music Festival there were ten events; in the sixth this year there have been thirty: musical, artistic and social events involving some 900 performers of all ages. There could be no clearer indication of the affection in which it is now held and of its establishment in the local calendar. Thanks to the continuing energies led by Chairman Andrew Summers and assisted by a new Artistic Director, James Day, and a whole host of musicians, professional and amateur, aided and abetted by a team of volunteers, it has in no way rested on its first laurels, promising as they were. The BBC Young Musician competition celebrates its fortieth anniversary this year, and the **Barnes Young Musician of the Year** which began modestly in 2017 with eight finalists, has already seen the number blossom into 19. The standard achieved by the competitors, all local by residence or education, was so high that we wondered how Hilary Davan Wetton (formerly Director of Music at St Paul's Girls' School) could single out a winner or even runners-up. In the end the winner was St Paul's School Year 9 pianist Calvin Leung with two Rakhmaninov pieces of dazzling assurance and precocious maturity. Silver medals went to violinists Haolin Zhao and Andreana Chan, while Robert Simmons (cello) and Milon Kalia (another violinist) were specially commended. Had there been an Audience Prize, trumpeter Eashan Shah might well have earned it by his instant rapport with his listeners. The adjudicator, like the 29 famous signatories of a letter in the Sunday Times on Easter Day, nonetheless identified short-sighted neglect by politicians regarding music teaching in schools which affects, particularly, state education. Creative industries are worth £91.8 bn to the UK, yet parents increasingly find themselves unable to afford music lessons for their children, however promising they are.

'Peace, ho! The moon sleeps with Endymion and would not be awak'd!... Soft stillness and the night become the touches of sweet harmony'. These words from The Merchant of Venice, Act V, memorably set by Vaughan Williams in his *Serenade to Music*, were sung in 2013: this year they were sung in the **Opening Concert** by an evenly-matched team of soloists with the Thames Youth Orchestra, to underline the theme of 'Peace and Harmonies'. Simon Ferris, Composer in Residence to the boys and Musician in Residence to the girls at the Tiffin Schools in Kingston, was the conductor in an all-English programme. Elgar's cello concerto, begun a hundred years ago as WWI began its final, worst, phase revealed its soloist and the conductor to be of one mind as it traversed a variety of moods and tempi. A former BBC Young Musician and now established performer and teacher, Guy Johnston set the standard for Jim Tse's solo, the ecstatic violin in Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending*. Jim, who led the TYO while at school, already shows a mature sensitivity and coped flawlessly with the technical difficulties at the end as the lark flew aloft, symbolizing (as John Ferris's notes suggested) 'an innocence lost' in the same war. Afterwards the orchestra grappled manfully with Moeran's long Symphony in G minor, strenuous passages alternating with more modal, reflective ones, the product of his own wartime experiences and a new-found love of Ireland.

The new Artistic Director is, like Simon, also at Tiffins, in his case Director of the famous Boys' Choir which we were to hear in action in **The Creation** ('Our song shall be the praise of God') by Haydn, followed the very next day with Handel's **Messiah** ('peace on earth') in which he conducted the Fulham Camerata, familiar

from previous festivals. Haydn's imitations of nature, although thought naïve by some critics, betray in truth a highly developed intellect and reflect the inspiration he had derived from London performances of *Messiah* and another Handel oratorio, *Israel in Egypt*, with its aural depiction of the Plagues -which we well remember from the 2016 festival.. Although this *Creation* omitted the 'great expressive duets' (New Grove) of Adam and Eve, it provided the essential story, beginning with amazingly adventurous harmonies, for 1798, in the Representation of Chaos. *Messiah* received a youthful interpretation, full of imagination and excitement (including trumpets placed at the back of the audience in 'Glory to God'). Some favourites were left out -'O thou that tellest', 'How beautiful are the feet'- and tempi were a bit too fast for listeners of my generation. (This was accentuated by the proximity of 'And he shall purify' and 'For unto us a child is born' without the intervening bass solo). But the chorus and Barnes Festival Orchestra, which accompanied in both concerts, followed the conductor's beat like hawks. Both teams of soloists (Charlotte Bowden, David De Winter and James Oldfield in *The Creation* and Camilla Harris, Amy Blythe, Rhys James Batt and Ben Rowarth in *Messiah*) were young, fresh-voiced and excellent.

The outstanding choral performance of the first week was that of Bach's **St Matthew Passion** at St Michael's, guided with loving care by Barnes's elder musical statesman, Dr Martin Neary, in tempi appropriate to its serious theme, the parts for double chorus sung by the English Chamber Singers, augmented by the St Michael's Choir and Tiffin Boys' Choir. Baroque feel was added by the Barnes Period Instrumentalists and a sensible feature was the allowance of time for re-tunings during this long work. The audience was encouraged to join in the Passion Chorale on two occasions, singing in English as opposed to the German of the rest (coached by Max Barley). The soloists were again a good team, London-trained except one singer from Dublin, and I took note of subtleties like a carefully measured trill from soprano Colette Boushell ('Blute nur'), sustained breath control from tenor Magnus Walker on the word 'Freuden', dignified and resonant bass legato from Michael Ronan and Laurence Williams (Jesus), lovely unforced tone from mezzo Elspeth Marrow in 'Erbarme dich' partnered by Alison Bury in the unforgettable violin obbligato -and a wonderful display of expressiveness and word-painting, always at the service of the music, from the Evangelist (Robert Murray), who made me think of the legendary Eric Greene. (He, however, had sung in English, before we were initiated into something called the Matthäuspassion!)

The second week began with a Come & Sing performance of Karl Jenkins's **The Armed Man -a Mass for Peace**. This is a very different assignment from the Come & Sing *Messiah* of 2016, this composer's unique style being characterized by sparse scoring and harmony over a static bass, and melodic repetitions enlivened by use of canonic imitations. It depends on the creation of atmosphere, and as such has won a loyal audience: the Benedictus, for instance, was broadcast on Palm Sunday. Lila Chrisp (mezzo) sang the solos, Adam Meyer sounded the confident trumpet refrains, Leo Popplewell contributed cello bass and Glen Dempsey played piano or organ as needed in this scaled-down version, under Howard Ionascu's direction. 'L'homme armé', used by composers from Dufay in the 15thc to Maxwell Davies in the 20<sup>th</sup>, was used as a motto-theme, returning finally with major inflections for 'Better is peace' in its impressive array of texts interpolated between standard liturgical ones. The English Chamber Choir showed a different sort of originality in their programme, which began with **Heav'nly Harmonies** by Roxanna Panufnik, a Composer Patron

since 2015. Don't be misled by the 17thc text from Dryden, her harmonies are the most contemporary you will hear at these festivals, yet so nicely scored as to be congenial to any audience. Already favoured with Handel's attention, the words invited illustration and must have added to the general jubilation at Dean Close School in Cheltenham, where it fittingly celebrated the new organ. Rebecca Taylor did the honours at St Mary's organ. Incidentally, Holst's younger brother Emil was briefly a pupil at Dean Close, later to achieve fame in films as 'Ernest Cossart'. There followed three works by the American composer James Sellars, who had written for the Choir's conductor Guy Protheroe's group called Spectrum an instrumental piece, *Return of the Comet*. Four members of Spectrum were present in this performance, which was full of humour, with lively, tricky syncopations, witty interplay between flute and clarinet, and passages of John Adams-like frenzy. It was preceded by three settings of Gertrude Stein matching her idiosyncratic wordplay, and Brahms's *Liebeslieder Walzer* were followed by James's *Kissing Songs* which they probably inspired, with texts from 84 BC to the 19thc in an assortment of dance rhythms beginning with waltz. The performance of *Return of the Comet* was facilitated by a grant from the Ned and Frances Black Fund, and particularly noteworthy was the presence in the audience of another friend of James (who died last year), Gary Knoble. A special arrangement of Barber's Adagio to the words of the Agnus Dei, unusually retaining the string element, was a moving tribute, and a *West Side Story* selection marked another friendship, Bernstein's.

'**Zimbe!**' marshalled a huge array of singers, mostly young, in a medley of African songs, mostly from South Africa but also Ghana and Zimbabwe, devised by Alexander L'Estrange, who supported James Day's direction from the piano, where he was surrounded by a jazz quintet from St Paul's School. (The full Jazz Band and National Youth Nonet were again in action at local venues.) I detected only two singers of African descent, but this merely strengthened the impression of solidarity with the up-and-coming nations who were capable of producing such energetic music, so full of hope. The downside to their expectations was evident in the songs of protest and a particularly moving funeral song, as well as 'Thula, Mama, Thula', described as a 'lullaby for mothers of imprisoned sons'.

Oustanding in the first chamber music recital, **Josh Salter** gave a taut rendering of Britten's Cello Sonata of 1961, the first of five works he wrote for Rostropovitch, with Adrian Brendle at the piano. Every note counts in this carefully constructed music, and they ensured we heard them all, even at the piano turn-overs, which reminded me of David Owen Norris. Britten's teacher Frank Bridge featured with his own Cello Sonata, a WWI piece begun in the year of Britten's birth, 1913. There were folk associations in the muted cello in the Adagio, and the encore was Bridges's familiar Cradle Song. Beethoven's variations on Handel's 'See, the conquering hero comes' balanced triumphalism with peace in the 9<sup>th</sup> variation. The current discord in Spain would have been far from Casals's mind when he penned his attractive arrangement of a Catalan folksong. **Henry Chandler**, who was later to conduct St Mary's Choir in his new role as Organist, showed his increasingly mature development as a violin soloist, partnered more than adequately again by John Paul Ekins in Beethoven's sunny 'Spring' Sonata and Richard Strauss's wonderful Sonata, a would-be tone poem, in which we heard all the harmonic and tonal richness that could be desired. Three players from the **Fibonacci Sequence**, founder-member Kathron Sturrock (piano), Robert Salter (violin) and Ashok Klouda (cello) followed

Bach's third Suite for solo cello and Mozart's tuneful A major Sonata with a powerfully expressive performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio which, in Kathron's words, 'most clearly reflects the vast impact of war and conflict' in its broad, solemn themes. The **Labuschagne Quartet**, after versions of some slight silent-film pieces by Shostakovich and six of Beethoven's 179 (believe it!) British folksongs, produced the 20th landmark which brought them together: Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, premiered when the composer was a P.o.W. at Görlitz in Silesia. Violinist, clarinetist, cellist and pianist all showed their total commitment to this haunting work, in which the unanimity in the 'Danse de la fureur' and the long-sustained cello vibrato in the 'Louange à l'éternité de Jésus' were particularly impressive. Nigel Clayton and his talented Indonesian protégée Imma Setiadi played piano in the **Czechoslovakia Centenary Concert** at Velehrad, the newly refurbished Czech Cultural Centre in Lonsdale Road. The richness of the Bohemian, Moravian and Slovakian heritage was demonstrated in music by Smetana, Dvořák, Dussek and Janáček, to whom were added Schulhoff, a Bohemian victim of the Nazi camps who, like so many others, showed distinct originality in his compositions (these called *Ironies* –a name reminiscent of Prokofiev's *Sarcasms*) before it was cruelly snuffed out. The Trio **Blondel** followed last year's example, the first concert at the London Wetland Centre, in taking Birds as their theme, but differed in that they played reproduction medieval instruments –last heard in our Magna Carta celebrations. Recorders were exchanged for shawms, then bagpipes large and small in music from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The written notes by Belinda Paul were admirable and scholarly and she, Lizzie Gutteridge and Emily Baines played and sang fluently, communicating their infectious enthusiasm to the audience.

I like the now established tradition of **two organ recitals**, one on the capacious instrument at St Michael's, the other on the two-manual classical one at St Mary's. James McVinnie was a model of rhythmic control on the latter although the detached minims in the fugue of his Bach Toccata and Fugue in F, however effective in the acoustic of St Paul's or the Abbey, sounded a little mannered compared with the magnificently striding legato quavers of the fugue subject in Dr Neary's Prelude and Fugue in B minor. Langlais's *Chant de Paix*, appropriate to the Festival theme, featured in both recitals, St Michael's having the edge with its new mutations. However, St Mary's programme could claim more originality in including a Prelude and Fugue on a Holst fragment, performed to the composer's evident satisfaction! Holst –the genuine article this time- was heard in the **Barnes Concert Band** programme devised and directed by Alan Goodall and ranging from Ponchielli to John Williams. James Curnow's arrangement of *Jupiter* works very well, and I have extracted a promise from Alan that his fine team will give us one of Holst's two Suites for Military Band next year. This is an area of his output which deserves to be drawn to the attention of audiences who only *The Planets* know! The evening finished with a piece by Edward Gregson, who was famously commissioned to write a piece celebrating the UK's entry into the EEC in 1973 –now presumably consigned to the dustbin of history. But he has fared better with *Laudate Dominum*, an ingenious set of variations on Parry's tune for 'O praise ye the Lord', which rounded off a well-conceived and presented programme.

Of course Holst, one of Parry's pupils, is one of the Composers of Barnes in Ellie Oldroyd's very readable book –still available- and she conducted one of her entertaining interviews with another, this time **Howard Goodall**. A good educator as

well as composer, his early love of Tudor music under the tutelage of Dr David Lumsden emerged as a chorister at New College. With that came an awareness of the effectiveness of counterpoint – combination of melodic parts- where so much choral music is harmony-based. With adolescence he noticed the affinity between the Beatles and the modal basis of folk music –and he passed onto us the nugget that Paul McCartney had embellished George Martin’s texture in ‘Eleanor Rigby’. Influences of Kurt Weill, Stravinsky, Richard Strauss indicate a composer open to wider influences than media-music of the ‘Dibley’ variety might tempt one to imagine, and in answer to a question from the audience he insisted on the value of knowing a wide spectrum, including serious modern music. Another local personality, **Alistair McGowan**, made a repeat appearance, this time sadly without Charlotte but still with Satie, albeit just one of the composers in a procession of mainly quiet music under the punning title ‘Piano Peace’. His love of others – eg Grieg, Debussy (died 1918)- was acknowledged, with glances at Glass’s minimalism and Pärt’s ‘tintinabulation’. His impressionism (with a small ‘i’) had the audience rocking, particularly the ‘Dad’s Army’ vignettes –he could surely do a complete instalment should the BBC lose the tape? His choice of music and explanations were enlightening, although the more exciting Impressionism (capital ‘I’) was provided by the performances of his mentor (‘and tormenter’) Anthony Hewitt: Ravel’s *La Valse* especially was superb. As for pictorial Impressionism, which was where it all started, this year’s **Photographic Exhibition** had some splendid examples –James Kirkland’s ‘Evening Glow’ and Tammy Marlar’s ‘Pen Ponds in Blue’, to name but two. Joe Bunker’s **Barnes Community Choir** at Holy Trinity Church was again a socially enjoyable experience for singers and audience, with rounds adding musical interest - as Holst recognized and taught his daughter Imogen, her book *Singing for Pleasure* helping to disseminate the vogue. (We heard some also in *Zimbe!*) Three members of the choir, the Queen Bees, added their own ‘eclectic mix’ and John Hudson made the skill of singing your songs to your own guitar accompaniment seem easy (which it isn’t!).

‘**Johann Sebastian**’ was an unusual musical drama based, obviously, on the life of Bach and devised by Australian actor Tama Matheson and Davina Clarke, whom we remember playing her violin at the Wetlands Centre last year. The harpsichordist on that occasion, Oliver John Ruthven, again supported her and Eleanor Minney (mezzo) sang on this occasion. The composer’s life was a hard one, full of personal tragedies, yet in the end a fulfilling one. It was not without actors’ opportunities for humour, albeit usually of the wry kind. Musical illustrations could hardly embrace the wonderful choral music, yet the performers had sought out many other gems for their resources, like the Laudamus Te from the B minor Mass and ‘Erbarne dich’ which we had heard in the St Matthew Passion. Less well known was the beautifully sung concluding aria ‘Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust’ from Cantata 170 (‘Delightful repose, favoured longing of the soul’), appropriate to the story and to the festival.

Alas, ‘Peace and Harmonies’ are purchased at a price, the ultimate one paid on the Cross. Tony Palmer’s 2013 film **Nocturne** dwelt on Britten’s pacifism. It is a very long film and Tony omitted half an hour but filled in missing detail verbally. He made the point that although criticized for going to the USA, the composer had tried to return as early as October 1941, only to be delayed by ‘the incompetence and stupidity of official America’. When he and Pears finally arrived in England the following year, they stayed at first with Peter’s parents in Castelnau. To his credit

Britten visited Belsen and, as Andrew warned us, the harrowing pictures still possess the power to shock. (How can anybody deny the Holocaust, for God's sake?) The film reminded us that such inhumanity continues –think of Syria, Yemen, Nigeria, Congo –still the 'heart of darkness', Afghanistan (I wrote music in memory of a 25-year old soldier, whose parents must have grave misgivings as they hear murmurings of 'Was it really worth it?'). In the 2017 festival we heard two Requiems, those of Brahms and Fauré: this year **Barnes Choir**, trained by Julian Collings and Elspeth Wilkes, gave us Mozart's deathbed setting, completed by Süssmayr. Weaker movements by the latter are saved by his intelligent adaptation of earlier ones, and he surely raised his own level of inspiration in the Benedictus. The choir gave a good account, as did the orchestra: the trombone was excellent in the Tuba mirum. Howard Goodall's 'Eternal Light', introduced to us in 2016 by Fulham Camerata, is a modern Requiem which mingles traditional and modern texts. On second hearing the pairing of Dies Irae and McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' was the most memorable movement, but it is all deeply felt. Lisa Swayne stood in very ably for the indisposed soprano soloist and Rosanna Cooper, John Evanson and John Findon (already familiar from *Carmina Burana* and *Israel in Egypt*) completed a talented quartet.

Hubert Parry died in 1918, only three weeks before the Armistice, as Jeremy Dibble, James Day's Professor of Musicology in his Durham student days, reminded us at the concluding **Choral Evensong**. Like Stanford, he was too old to serve and forced to endure the loss of so many of his promising charges in the conflict. Many had gone on to study and make friends in Germany before the war. We heard the choirs of St Mary's and St Michael's sing Parry's setting of Henry Vaughan's 'My soul, there is a country' and Stanford's 150<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and we all joined in 'Jerusalem' (Parry pioneered the unison hymn, we were told), as well as hymns to tunes by Holst and Howells. The Durham connection was further evident in the William Smith Responses. This service was a fitting conclusion to a festival full of interest and owing much to all sponsors and participants, not forgetting the team which prepared a steady stream of attractive printed programmes, of which that for the St Matthew Passion was particularly worth mention.

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