

# Festivity with rare Respighi

Gary Humphreys on a Christmastide feast in a St Albans church

CHRISTMAS and the New Year in St Albans provided an embarrassment of riches for the lover of tradition. There was superb music and impressive ceremony at the Abbey, the St Albans Mummings performing around the town on Boxing Day, and a New Year concert at St Peter's Church on 2 January featuring "professionals having fun" — professional musicians doing what they do best, but dusting off their second, third, or even fourth instruments to contribute to the ensemble in this seasonal celebration.

The guiding spirit is Jeremy White, stalwart of the Covent Garden opera company (who, incidentally, would make a worthy Father Christmas for the St Albans Mummings). The colleagues and friends he gathered around him included such distinguished singers as the tenor Rogers Covey Crump (one of our great Bach Evangelists) and the soprano Deborah Miles Johnson, both of whom contributed wonderful solos during the evening. A total of 36 performers — known collectively as The Pastime Players and Ensemble — were listed in the printed programme.

This concert was somewhat different from the one that I reviewed in 2012 (Arts, 13 January

2012), which concentrated on the words and music of a Baroque and Georgian Christmas. This year, two extremes were juxtaposed: medieval and modern, but showing how modern composers have often taken as their inspiration the texts, forms, and imagery of the Middle Ages. In fact, pieces by Britten, Maxwell Davies, and Robert Sherlaw Johnson sounded uncannily at home rubbing shoulders with Pérotin, Adam de la Halle, and Guillaume de Machaut.

There were several high spots for me. They were a magical performance of "Dormi Jesu", a duet for soprano and clarinet by Anton Webern, with Deborah Miles Johnson and the clarinettist Edmund White — "[probably] the only twelve-tone carol from the Second Viennese School that you will ever hear", according to Jeremy White's programme note — followed by a work previously unknown to me, "Our Lady's Song" by Christopher Symons, written for the boys of the Roman Catholic cathedral in Liverpool, and paraphrasing the 15th-century "Jesu, swete sone dere". Lovely. It was also good to hear Peter Warlock's *Benedicamus Domino*, with a correction to the composer's text in the Latin refrain.

In the first part of the concert we were also treated to extracts from two dramas: the Second Shepherd's Play from the Towneley (Wakefield) cycle of Mystery Plays, and *Officium Stellae* (the Ceremony of the Star) from the 13th-century Rouen Gradual, both presented in costume. It has to be said that these would both have benefited from tighter



By appointment: a massed choir of almost 300 gave a concert in Buckingham Palace, in the presence of the Prince of Wales, before Christmas, to conclude the celebrations of the tercentenary of the Three Choirs Festival

direction and greater care in the delivery of the spoken text. (Why is it that singers seldom bring the technique that projects their singing voices over large spaces in a concert hall or opera house to similarly assist the clear and audible projection of speech?) But considering that the participants meet only on the day for the preparation of these programmes, the result was highly commendable.

In a different category was what must be a pretty rare performance of *Lauda per la Natività del Signore*, which ended the programme. It was composed between 1928 and 1930 by Ottorino Respighi, best known

for his great orchestral trilogy *Pines of Rome*, *Fountains of Rome*, and *Roman Festivals*, each involving a huge orchestra. This is on a quite different scale, with soloists, chorus, and a small instrumental ensemble characterised by oboe, cor anglais and bassoons, those pastoral instruments already familiar from the Pifa in *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, the Christmas cantatas and concertos of earlier Italian composers such as Corelli and Scarlatti, or "The Shepherds' Farewell" from Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*.

Performances are usually given in concert formation, but the com-

poser's widow, Elsa Respighi, made suggestions for staging the piece, and at St Albans it was presented as a tableau, again in costume. The audience, whose attention had perhaps wandered a little during some earlier parts of the concert, was entranced, and showed its appreciation with long and enthusiastic applause.

The characteristically "cheeky" encore began as a medieval carol but somehow ended up as *Merry Xmas, Everybody*, Slade's hit song from 1973, complete with electric guitars. But who could disagree with the words in the refrain, "Everybody's having fun?"

## Out with the old year and in with the new

Roderic Dunnett looks both ways at music in late 2015 and treats in score for 2016

AS THE main musical venues in London launch their orchestral programmes, it is not just the Barbican and the South Bank that will be packaging music and performers in significant and appetising series. Others also merit our attention and admiration.

The city's newest high-quality venue, King's Place (near King's Cross station), will extend its daring forays into the Classical and Baroque: "Baroque Unwrapped", running the whole season, has now reached its eighth year.

The Cadogan Hall, near Sloane Square, is home to a series of choral concerts programmed with acumen by Peter Phillips, founder of the Tallis Scholars. Built in 1901 by the German firm Bechstein to show off the qualities of its outstanding pianos, the Wigmore Hall, north of Oxford Street, continues to set the pace for song recitals. But of similar importance are the Rosenblatt recitals, founded in 2000; they have now moved to the Wigmore Hall (and the Royal Opera), but for years established their pedigree at St John's, Smith Square.

The London Festival of Baroque

Music 2016 (13-19 May, in Westminster Abbey as well as St Peter's, Eaton Square, and St John's, Smith Square), part of a series of festivals formerly sponsored by Lufthansa, will feature treasures of the 18th century and earlier, and, in the section "Future Baroque", two Italianate-sounding newcomer ensembles: Ceruleo, formed by students from the Guildhall, and Ignis, whose members hail from the historical department of the Royal College of Music.

St John's has gained fame for its choral feast leading up to Christmas and heralding New Year. We have been spoilt by such riches as Stephen Layton's choir of Trinity College, Cambridge, and his professional group Polyphony; by the choir of Clare College under Tim Brown's successor, Graham Ross, embracing works from Sheppard to William Mathias; Peter Phillips's Tallis Scholars, bringing together Tallis and Arvo Pärt; and — perhaps most distinctive — the Baroque collective Solomon's Knot, founded in 2008 by Jonathan Sells, and still notably young, which set Bach against his great predecessors, Johann Schelle (1648-1701) and Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722).

Robert King and his The King's Consort did sterling work recording both on separate discs for Hyperion (now mid-price on Helios, CDGH 55373 and 55394); but, otherwise, who, outside Leipzig, hears Schelle and Kuhnau and their thrilling cantatas nowadays? This was easily

the plum concert of the series, in the matter of repertoire.

But I plumped for the recital by the choir of Merton College, Oxford, under Benjamin Nicholas, mainly because I have been astounded repeatedly by the choir's achievements. Phillips had a hand in its founding, and Merton is easily up to the standard of Magdalen and New College, both of which are scaling new heights to this day: it has had an effect on Oxford music comparable to the emergence of Trinity and Clare in Cambridge, but a case can be made for its often having the edge.

Unexpectedly dull though "O Radix Jesse" by Rihards Dubra (born 1964) felt — although the rich impact of this Latvian composer's output can be experienced on the Choir of Royal Holloway's superb Hyperion disc CDA 67799 — Merton's diction, tuning, and timing were near-perfect.

Nicholas demonstrates a marvellous skill at getting a vital and assertive, but not overpowering, sound from his young Merton women. They shone: in Byrd galore, wonderfully delivered; in that other Latvian, Eriks Ešenvalds, the more potent of these Baltic prodigies.

Outdoing all, for my money, was the English Matthew Martin, who is taking up an appointment at Keble College, Oxford. Martin's "O Oriens" and the subsequent "Nowell sing we", in common with his other growing choral output, put him up there with James MacMillan, and

perhaps Gabriel Jackson and Howard Skempton, among today's composers of sacred choral music in the UK today. Martin features in Merton's recorded output, on the Delphian label.

The current organist of the Temple Church, Roger Sayer, has the boys there singing as well as ever. The Temple Winter Festival included another gifted young group, Eo Nomine, whose repertoire and presentation were impressive. Lassus, Guerrero, Peter Philips — these are offerings one might find in any programme of The Sixteen or the Tallis Scholars. But Anerio, the wonderful Johannes Eccard *In dulci jubilo*, and, thanks to the tenor and baritone of this quintet, the swingeing "Laudate Dominum" of that great Dutch musician Jan Sweelinck, made for an uplifting programme.

The arches and crannies of the Temple Church work mysteries and wonders with the sound. I wasn't sure that the choir's exact placing could not have been bettered, but audiences like to see performers as well as hear them, and there has to be a compromise. A clever chiasmus in the arrangement of the programme spoke reams for this group's sharp intelligence.

I have lauded Jonathan Rathbone's skills as composer and arranger recently. At the concert at St Mary's, Walthamstow, the London Forest Choir really pulled all the stops out. How nice it was to see the name of Charles Steggall,

once organist of Lincoln's Inn and, for two decades, secretary of the Bach Society, on a programme. "Remember Now Thy Creator" is one of the most melting English church anthems to emerge from the entire 19th century. My H. C. Colles edition of *Grove* tells me that there is a mini-opera, *Alcestis*, and a set of Variations on an Original Theme for orchestra. Perhaps someone should get digging.

Rathbone digs deep for ideas for his arrangements, which are always inventive, never banal. "Sleep, Little Child" is a good example. The choir brought to it sound tuning and excitingly uplifting singing. The young Eleanor Grant, who at 13 embarked on a series of solos, already has oodles of personality, and a musicianly quality that one can only salute. "Winter Wonderland" (not a Rathbone arrangement) was the only dud. The Forest Choir will sing a programme of European sacred music at St Edmund's, Chingford, on 27 February.

I had to venture out of London to hear The Sixteen: Harry Christophers varied the fare from that of their regular Choral Pilgrimage with a week's worth of Christmas jollies. I caught up with them in the Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham, which had the courage to promote the concert itself, and was rewarded with a good audience. This venue is one of the most congenial in the Midlands. Christophers has produced the most beautifully judged and paced performance of the late John Tavener's "The Lamb" that I have ever heard. As just about every choir sings the piece, that's saying

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