

## Leith Hill Musical Festival 2017

The 2017 Leith Hill Musical Festival was the first with our new conductor Jonathan Willcocks. Remarkably, he is only the sixth conductor since the festival began with Ralph Vaughan Williams at the helm in 1905. The first of the three April concerts began in splendid fashion with Jonathan's stirring new arrangement of the national anthem. The choirs - Dorking, Epsom, Horsley and Leatherhead - were on excellent form and gave a powerful rendition of Parry's *Blest pair of sirens*. Particularly impressive was the closing section, enjoying to the full the great breadth and majesty of the music. The short competition pieces included a lively spiritual for the ensembles - most effectively sung - and a beautiful version of Eric Whitacre's *The seal lullaby* for the men's voices.

The morning's competition had been close and showed a high standard, with all the marks in the mid and upper eighties. In the end, victory went to Leatherhead, though Dorking were only two points behind. The prizes were presented by the evening's special guest - Simon Coombs, chairman of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society.

In the second half of the concert, we heard Vaughan Williams' *Dona nobis pacem*, a fine work though not very often performed. A heartfelt expression of pacifism, it depicts the sadness and the horrors of war but also carries a hope of peace in the future. The choirs were supported by the excellent Southern Pro Musica orchestra and by two fine soloists. Baritone Gareth Brynmor John was dramatic, especially in the 'Angel of death' section, while the marvellous voice of soprano Bibi Heal soared above the choir and orchestra, and also sank to a beautiful pianissimo for her final fervent prayer for peace.

On Friday, the competition was fought out between the choirs of Buckland & Betchworth, Capel, Holmbury St Mary and Oxshott. The result was a clear win for Holmbury; they took nearly all the prizes, including the open class, leaving Buckland & Betchworth to claim the men's song and the ensemble.

The evening began with the presentation of banners and trophies by Councillor Stephen Cooksey, a keen supporter of the arts in Mole Valley. The concert was then devoted to a complete performance of Mendelssohn's grand oratorio *Elijah*. This is a powerful work telling the Old Testament story of the great prophet. The performance was a highly dramatic one, with Marcus Farnsworth giving an excellent portrayal of Elijah and the chorus singing with great conviction throughout.

Saturday's concert featured the choirs of Beare Green & Newdigate, Bookham, Mickleham and Shalford. The programme began with Haydn's *Little organ mass*. In this, the choirs were joined by this year's Leith Hill award winner, Margo Arsane, whose beautiful clear soprano voice was ideally suited to the solo in the Benedictus.

The short competition pieces formed an attractive and varied selection. I particularly enjoyed hearing Herbert Howells' *Piping down the valleys wild*, sung by the women, and Harold Darke's setting of *To daffodils*, which was the ensemble piece. The men clearly enjoyed their love song to Marianne too!

After the interval we heard Andrew Carter's *Benedicite*. This is a delightful piece, a hymn of praise in which, in eleven short movements, all of creation praises the Lord. Carter creates vivid musical depictions of everything mentioned in the text, from ice and thunder to whales and butterflies, and both choir and orchestra revelled in creating these sounds. Three of the movements are written for children's choir, and for this we were joined by young singers from Reigate Grammar School and St Mary's Preparatory School. The children sang confidently and clearly and it was a delight to hear them.

In the morning competition, Bookham had emerged as the overall winner, though prizes were also won by Mickleham and Shalford. The trophies were presented by Shaun Fenton, the headmaster of Reigate Grammar School. In his lively speech, he quite rightly stressed the importance of a musical education for children and how much music can contribute to their development. If only more schools would follow his example ...!

Next year's festival will see some changes. The three divisions are being reorganised so that different groups of choirs will compete against each other; this will inject some variety into the competitions and give people the chance to meet new friends in different choirs. A competition has been launched for composers to write a piece for the lower voices, for use on one of the festival days. And it is planned to form a festival youth choir which will join with the adult choirs to perform a work requiring young voices; next year this will be John Rutter's *Mass of the Children*. It is good that the festival maintains some traditions (such as singing the national anthem and Jerusalem) but it is also good to have innovations. Let's all look forward to the 2018 festival!

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