

Leith Hill Musical Festival 2015

The 2015 Leith Hill Musical Festival was a very special one, as we were celebrating Brian Kay's 20th year as festival conductor. To mark the occasion, LHMF had commissioned a new work from Bob Chilcott, one of the most popular and prolific of choral composers today, and the festival's president, John Rutter, had also written a new piece as a gift to Brian and the festival choirs. It's not often that the festival is able to give *two* world premieres!

Thursday got the festival off to an excellent start with a keenly-fought competition between the choirs of Dorking, Epsom, Leatherhead and Horsley. The result was close but Dorking emerged as the overall winner, a very pleasing result for their new conductor Hilary Campbell. A highlight of the evening concert was the first performance of John Rutter's new piece, *Awake, ye Heavenly Choirs*, uplifting and celebratory in tone and a great pleasure to sing. Another highlight was an early work by Ralph Vaughan Williams, *The Garden of Proserpine*, which has only recently been unearthed. The music is distinctive and impressive, and it is something of a mystery why RVW left it to languish unperformed and unpublished. The prizes were presented by Lord David Trimble, who revealed a keen enthusiasm for RVW, especially the rarely-performed operas. After the interval the major work in the second half of the concert was Mozart's *Requiem*, always a deeply moving experience to sing or to listen to.

Friday's concert saw the premiere of Bob Chilcott's *Dances of Time*. Bob had chosen five texts, each dealing in a different way with the passage of time, and written five movements in contrasting musical styles, ranging from vibrant and energetic to calm and meditative. The overall mood was celebratory, befitting the nature of the commission. Both choir and orchestra clearly enjoyed performing this exciting music, and Bob appeared on the platform afterwards to huge applause. The English Festival Orchestra, who make such a large contribution to the success of the festival concerts, opened the evening with a scintillating performance of Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* overture, and the main choral work on the programme was Mendelssohn's glorious *Hymn of Praise*. In the morning competition, Holmbury St Mary had swept the board, winning all the main classes, and the prizes were presented by Marilynne Davies, one of the morning's adjudicators.

For Saturday's programme, most of the smaller competition pieces - the part song, the ensemble, the men's and women's songs - were taken from *A Fancy of Folksongs*, a group of delightful folksong arrangements by Cecilia McDowall. Cecilia was the special guest who presented the trophies to the winning choirs. Beare Green & Newdigate had won the morning competition by a clear margin, taking most of the main classes. The concert also included another performance of John Rutter's present to the festival, *Awake, ye Heavenly Choirs*. Most appropriately for a spring festival - and for a week in which the cold weather finally turned spring-like - the closing piece was 'Spring' from Haydn's oratorio *The Seasons*. The traditional communal singing of *God be with you till we meet again* rounded off another enjoyable and highly successful festival. We look forward now to 2016!

Ian Codd