

REPORT ON THE 2014 FESTIVAL BY THE FESTIVAL CONDUCTOR, BRIAN KAY

It is Monday morning after the festival and a wonderfully warm glow of contentment washes over me as I think back over three glorious days of music-making: exhaustion yes, but exhilaration in more than equal measure. I cannot emphasise enough the sense of privilege I feel in being part of the Leith Hill family, nineteen years after this unique pleasure was so generously offered to me. My first wish, as ever, is to thank you and everyone at the festival for continuing to enrich my life more than I can say, in this very special way.

I then go right back to the St Matthew, which, having gone from strength to strength over so many years, just sounds and feels better every time. That this year was prepared so well and so lovingly by Val Beynon added yet another dimension, in a performance which was so deeply felt, so very well sung technically and with the usual delights from our soloists and Canzona. The tuning, the diction, the commitment and the sheer spirituality of this performance was something I shall never forget. Our thanks to Val and, as ever, to Jean for her rock-like support at the piano. Our soloists, including a new evangelist – the magnificent Nick Pritchard – added so much to that overall glow.

The combined rehearsals this year were particularly enjoyable too: maybe the choice of music had something to do with it! And I think I felt more than usually confident that we were in for a good one!

The choirs of Div 1 gave us a tremendous start with such a fine competition – each choir excelling itself and showing what a great impact the four conductors are having on their charges. That is true right across the board in all three divisions and deserves all our thanks – particularly mine. The Thursday concert was one of the most enjoyable I can remember for a long time: the little Mozart Mass sung with real freshness and then the Paul Carr *Requiem for an Angel*. When the publisher first sent me the score, I knew this would either be OK or a knock-out. In the end, it was so hugely successful that I couldn't shift a moment of it from my mind and that night slept not a wink! I'm sure Paul was entirely genuine when he referred to it as the best performance of it that he had heard: an honour for us and just reward for all the hard work that went into it. Among other delights was the ensemble class evening performance of Sullivan's *The Long Day Closes* – a moment of pure magic. The concert – and indeed the whole festival – got off to a great start with Jean and Alan's delightful performance of the Moszkowski *Spanish Dances*. How lucky we all are to have such expertise at our disposal.

The Rossini *Petite Messe* is never an easy sing and I was thrilled with the determination with which the Div 2 choirs went for it – and made a really good fist of it. The two big fugues require such stamina, which makes it a big 'ask' at the end of a long day. But it fairly fizzed along, aided by Alan's marathon performance on the Fazioli grand and by a dream team of young soloists. Kezia Bienek (the LHMF award winner on the recommendation of the Royal College) is a real find and we could not have hoped for a better Rossini soprano. Yet again, the ensemble class provided one of the highlights of the evening concert with such beautifully controlled singing.

Saturday always looked good on paper and in the event, we could not have enjoyed a better climax to the three days. The Durufle *Requiem* is famously tricky, as much so for a sight-reading orchestra as for a well-prepared choral force. The mood was beautifully captured, which showed just how very important those months of learning really are. Then came John Rutter's *Feel the Spirit*. And in came

the divine Melanie Marshall. What a voice, what a performer and what a lovely person. She gave us an object-lesson in how to sing a song.

Her glorious voice right there in my right ear is something I shall never forget, nor I suspect will anyone else who was lucky enough to be there. But the choirs combined magnificently and entered totally into the spirit of John's masterly arrangements – clearly uplifted by Melanie's lead. Our distinguished President's perfectly crafted orchestrations gave the EFO a chance to flex its muscles and it did so with suitable abandon. Result: heaven!

My only disappointment is that – even for this amazing concert – there were empty seats in the hall. I do try to encourage members of each division to support the other divisions, and some do, splendidly. But many don't and many will never have sat in the audience and listened to a festival concert. This is sad, as we really are all part of the festival family and should enjoy each other's support. Anyone who was not there on the Saturday night missed a uniquely wonderful opportunity to see and hear our festival at its best; if you've never sat in the audience, you can have no real feeling for the impact these concerts can give and I earnestly beg those who never have to give it a go next time. The cost of the tickets is remarkably low for the quality of goods on offer and it's so good for a choir – as everyone knows – to perform to a full house. Do please try – you'll be amazed at what you see and hear.

On each of the two nights for which the EFO played so splendidly for us, several members of the orchestra commented to me how very much better than ever the singing had been. I was only too happy to correct them when they credited me with this. It's always good when professional orchestral players – busy sight-reading so many notes – have the time to listen and notice something like that and it is always my pleasure to inform them that the real work is done week after week with the choirs working so hard with their own conductors. No room for complacency, of course, as there always is – and always will be – room for improvement. But if we can get – and give – the sort of satisfaction we do, then our labours will never be in vain.

The last word from me goes to the administrative team, whose tireless efforts – year in and year out – make it possible for us all to enjoy this privilege. Liz and her entire team give more than we can ever imagine in terms of sheer effort and determination and we must all remain profoundly grateful for what it does for us all. Guess what: it's the Monday morning after the festival and I've already started counting the days to the next one! My special thanks all round for all the hard work, the dedication and the sheer pleasure that binds us all together. Music continues to win the cause – may it be ever thus!

P.S. On the 'Come and Sing' in September - Bob Chilcott's Commission '*Dances of Time*'

Yesterday was a real LHMF day - lots of happy people making beautiful music and enjoying an out-of-season get-together. Bob was great and the piece just terrific. I'm sure the choirs will all have a lovely time with those songs. Thanks to all for excellent organisation. Bob and I both loved it!

Brian Kay

Festival Conductor