

Requiem shakes the Church

Kantorei, Crowborough Choral Society and Sinfonietta Lübeck were convincing

Death, mourning, despair – anyone who wants to offer these as a package writes a Requiem. Like Brahms, for example. In the Rellingen Church on Saturday, this work was on the programme, along with his “Four Serious Songs”. Plenty of potential here: the soloists were Eva Koch (Soprano) and Keno Brandt (Bass Baritone), the Sinfonietta Lübeck had come along, complete with harp, and the Rellinger Kantorei (*church choir*) were supported by their English partner-choir, the Crowborough Choral Society (CCS). A programme of superlatives, under the baton of the Kantor (*Church Music Director*), Oliver Schmidt.

He came up the aisle like a whirlwind and kicked off with the première of the “Four Serious Songs” (Op. 121), based on passages from the Bible that are as lugubrious as their musical setting. Brahms himself had scored this work for piano accompaniment; later arrangements were for singers and orchestra, but for voices in a higher register. According to Schmidt, “the arrangement for bass-baritone and orchestra was prepared specially for tonight’s concert, when it will be heard for the first time ever”. And it was a fantastic combination: the sombre tones fitted Brandt’s voice like a glove – unbelievably deep and sonorous – full of oppressive melancholy. By contrast the ending was lighter and daintier: the classic turn towards hope and belief, the soft tones of the strings dying away almost in anti-climax.

The German Requiem (Op. 45) is similarly constructed: a gigantic bombshell of despair which dissolves into the harmonic tones of the flute. However, before it got to that stage all the stops were pulled out, with drums and trumpets; Brahms made the Rellingen church quake. The first part of the Requiem was almost without respite – dramatic and a challenge for both singers and players. Especially in the second movement the full orchestra built up to a monumental wall of sound which at times even drowned the choir, and hopefully did not give the timpanist tennis elbow, as she literally had her hands full.

Amongst the tumult there was one exception (apart from the finale), and this was the waltz “How lovely are Thy dwellings”, and the solo “Now you have sorrow”. Koch, the soprano, sang her only passage of the evening brilliantly. Brandt, on the contrary, beside his “four serious songs”, had several more solos. Briefly, in his next entry “Lord, teach me...”, his voice showed signs of tiredness. In very high passages, the soprano section of the choir sounded slightly shrill; apart from that the choirs produced a very harmonic, balanced sound that was at its best in the short a cappella sections.

Felisa Kowalewski