

18 October 2008

#### Oxford Pro Musica Singers University Church

Ralph Vaughan Williams once said that he was “tired of choral works in which one couldn't hear the words”. So he composed *An Oxford Elegy*, in which a largely wordless choir supplies the backing to a spoken text — in this case mostly taken from Matthew Arnold's poem *The Scholarship Boy*. Narrator Brian Kay started as a singer, but he was also trained to enunciate the spoken word properly by doyen Radio 3 announcer Cormac Rigby. Here, however, he was sometimes stymied by the University Church's amplification system, which presumably wasn't designed to carry speech over a full choir and orchestra. At one entertaining moment, we were seemingly told: “Snowflakes fell In Christ Church hall.” Meanwhile the Singers and the Oxford Sinfonia provided appropriately floating and atmospheric backing.

Later, choral words were very much to the fore in Haydn's *Harmoniemesse*. This was Haydn's last completed work of any size, and it evidently taxed the aged composer. But as conductor Michael Smedley made clear, Haydn remained at the height of his powers, and produced an inspired and celebratory score. In the opening *Kyrie*, for instance, Smedley caught both the grandeur and the bounce of the music, while the *Gloria* came to a thrilling conclusion. The Pro Musica Singers are plainly in good form at present, with confident, incisive entries serving them well in the *Benedictus*. The soloists were Helen Ashby, Emma Ashby, Benedict Hymas, and Oliver Hunt — a powerful, if not ideally balanced, quartet. This may not have been the most prayerful performance of the *Harmoniemesse* ever, but it would certainly have kept its dedicatee awake — the Mass was composed to celebrate the birthday of Princess Esterházy, the wife of a Haydn's patron.

Also on good form was the Oxford Sinfonia, eight of whose members gave a lively and refreshing performance of Mozart's *Serenade In C minor* between the choral works. They deserve credit by name, but, alas, they remained anonymous in the programme.

Giles Woodforde