

WHEN Ware Choral Society, in Hertfordshire, formed in 1902, learned that their summer concert was to be reviewed in the *Church Times*, they were pleased, but puzzled about why. Although the composers chosen for this concert are not unusual — Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven — the music is perhaps rarely heard, particularly the concert's centrepiece, Beethoven's *Choral Fantasia*.

This strange work was Beethoven's attempt to draw together all the performers at a mammoth concert already lasting more than four hours in 1802 in an unheated hall in Vienna (unlike the Drill Hall, Ware, which was overwhelmingly hot) in a grand finale that begins as a piano sonata, grows into a piano concerto, and ends up as a dry run (possibly) for the Ninth ("Choral") Symphony of ten years later.

The choral "theme" at the end, from Beethoven's song "*Gegenliebe*", is closely related to "*Freude, schöne Götterfunken*", and at the words "*und Kraft*", the music resembles "*vor Gott*", just before the *Alla marcia* of the Ninth Symphony's finale. The opening probably began as an improvisation at the piano by Beethoven which was only later written down, and the whole piece demands a virtuoso pianist. At Ware, it had one, in the person of Barbara Manning, whose usual function is to accompany the choir's rehearsals — an essential task, of course, but one that might not suggest the innate skill and musicianship we heard at this performance. It was quite simply stunning — so cleanly executed — and

brought the audience to its feet at the end.

The concert opened with *Litaniae de venerabili altaris Sacramento* (K.243), written in 1776 and the last and most mature of Mozart's four litanies. These are pieces in which Mozart threw off the constraints necessary in his many Masses for Salzburg and elsewhere. For instance, the soprano solo "*Dulcissimum convivium*" is virtuosic and operatic, as is the tenor's "*Panis vivus*", described by Professor Ivor Keys as "one of the jolliest of all pleas for mercy". Indeed, the tenor, Edward Ross — like his fellow soloists an advanced student at the Royal Academy of Music — impressed with the straightforward and unfussy dispatch of the long semiquaver runs.

Mozart's choral music is not easy, the shifting tonalities being particu-

larly challenging to a choir; but, after a slightly plodding start to the first movement, the performance soon got into its stride, and here, as in the other music on the programme, the choir sang with a firm tone and considerable vitality, thanks perhaps to the conducting of the vastly experienced Julian Williamson and some very good playing from the Pro Arte Orchestra.

The concert ended with Haydn's *Harmonie Mass* — *Harmonie* referring to the prominent use of wind instruments — and there were superlative contributions here and at other times from the wind principals, who cannot be mentioned by name because, regrettably, the orchestral players were not listed in the printed programme. In the Mozart *Agnus Dei*, for example, solo flute, oboe, and cello played with the greatest delicacy.

Haydn apparently claimed that he was "labouring wearily" in writing this Mass, but the outcome is one of the composer's grandest pieces — sonorous orchestration and measured tempos. Again in the *Agnus Dei*, the wind band and soloists combine and contrast to great effect, followed by a brisk fanfare and an optimistic "*Dona nobis pacem*" to end the piece, which was to be Haydn's last major work.

Although all the music in this programme was written within a period of 32 years, the variety could not have been greater, and the choice of works was particularly imaginative, especially the inclusion of the Beethoven. Of the vocal soloists, outstanding was the soprano Ella Taylor, given more opportunity to shine than the others, and grasping that opportunity with courage and an enviable maturity of voice and musicianship.

The music offered less opportunity to her colleagues, who sang well as an ensemble, but whose solos were more modest. I would have liked to hear more of the bass, Thomas Bennett, and the mezzo Hannah Bennett, whose music perhaps lay a little low for her sometimes. The hard surfaces of the Drill Hall enabled the music to come over powerfully, but soloists (Ella Taylor excepted) were sometimes overwhelmed by the orchestra.

This was a hugely enjoyable concert before a near-capacity audience unafraid to show its enthusiasm. Rumours of the death — or at least the decline — of amateur choral music, if this experience is anything to go by, are an exaggeration.



Raised and unable to die: Lazarus of Bethany, wandering the earth for millennia, and an anonymous Dying Man meet in *Perpetual: A sonic opera*, with electronic music by James Shearman, staged by Between Teeth at The Bunker, 53a Southwark Street, London SE1, until 1 July. Box office: phone 0207 234 0486. www.bunkertheatre.com. Reviewed at www.churchtimes.co.uk