

Proms at Pixton
Voices of Exmoor
31st August 2019

A review by Richard Westcott

Pixton Park, basking in the last low sunlight of a late August evening made a wonderful and fitting venue for Voices of Exmoor. And how appropriate too for a concert centred on a theme of tradition and patriotism was this lovely house, soaked in English history.

We were each thoughtfully provided with our own union flag bundled in a nicely designed matching programme as we entered a bedecked red, white and blue space, to be entertained – well, royally.

And so to the music – a splendidly mixed selection, ranging from traditional folk song (freshly arranged) to Lennon and McCartney; from Thomas Arne (of course, this event drawing inspiration from that famous Last Night occasion) to the West End and Broadway.

In fact, it was the musical theatre and films that provided most of the material, and here the choir gave of its best.

After a rousing *It's a grand night for singing* (which it certainly was) and a bit of gentle Beatles, we found ourselves in Lloyd Webber's Opera house in Paris – chilled by those terrifying minor chords. Here's a choir that can make a big – I might even say operatic – noise, unusual for a community choir. An equally effective performance was the selection of Bond themes and songs. It was a clever though potentially challenging arrangement that had the human voice imitating those percussive brass-section (impossible to reproduce here) blasts – but once again, the choir pulled it off: we were thrown back in our seats, and that dripping red blood spot centre screen was almost visible...

But there were some lovely quiet moments too. I particularly enjoyed the upper voices' version of *Somewhere* from *West Side Story*. Presenting smaller groups made for a pleasant variation from the full choir. Another example was the famous Gendarmes' duet, performed by all the tenors and basses, with – how shall I put it? – a strong visual element, which generated much laughter.

The hard-to-classify *Adiemus* with its strange mix of African tribal and Celtic melodies, weird words and classical/folk/pop inheritances was the high point for me. A whole-hearted commitment by every choir member was emphasised by their singing from memory, which enabled some very effective relating between individuals, along with great attention to the conductor producing particularly effective ensemble work. The result was a well-integrated, powerful and joyous performance, nicely complemented by Arwen Leaver's recorder.

While *Adiemus* is made up of words that do not ask to be understood, they play a crucial part, something that this choir is clearly well aware of. Diction throughout the concert was excellent, with nicely enunciated final consonants giving both lift and suspense, apparent right from the start as in 'a grand night'.

Balance too, helped by the friendly acoustic of the elegant arched room, was good, though a tight performing space tended to obscure the tenors and basses. Perhaps a slightly raised platform for the men might help in future?

As always, Joke Routledge accompanied with style and panache – whether it was a case of singing in the rain or extolling the Mother of the Free, celebrating the last of the summer wine or coping with a drunken sailor. She certainly came into her own in those rousing final items, with an appropriate and well-chosen encore of Jerusalem. (Now *there* are some fine, real words).

Great credit must go to Musical Director Amanda Taylor for producing a highly successful concert. Items were introduced with humour, and her light touch gave the entire evening a delightfully benign flavour. Here is a conductor – a performer and singer herself, who therefore knows what it feels like – who can relate to her singers by being right there supportively with them, giving confidence and reassurance. Entries and finishes were neat, a good dynamic range maintained throughout (not easy for an amateur choir over a long evening) and a wide emotional spectrum from the tragic to the comedic, culminating in an extrovert patriotic outburst was demonstrated.

At the end of the day, music is about creating something together, and communication. It may seem a little absurd for grown-ups to be singing at the tops of their voices while waving toy union flags, but that sheer expression of fun and joy after an evening of many shared emotions represented something quite special and memorable.

Thankyou Voices of Exmoor for this achievement – may your bounds be set ever wider, and I for one will wave my flag for you.