

Voices of Exmoor – Our Musical Journey

Concert at Woolhanger Manor

September 17th 2022

One voice...

It was a brave decision to start with just one voice – but it worked.

Which says something distinctive right from the start about this unique choir – it's prepared to take risks.

What other community choir would take the risk of (successfully, in the event) applying to a national music-making project, actively participating in the composition of an ambitious piece and choosing to make the definitive recording for Radio 3 at a live concert?

It paid off handsomely.

Over the Moor, created by Hannah Fredsgaard-Jones with support from Lynne Plowman, was appropriately fresh, with an ongoing outdoors feeling of travel befitting the flowing waters, moving creatures and changing seasons of Exmoor, being original yet clearly part of the English pastoral tradition, and truly illustrative of the place.

The choir itself had asked for a challenge in the construction of this piece, which was taking a risk, but the resulting various changes of mood, rhythms and dynamics were all well surmounted... the packed house loved it.

Risks were also taken with some of the other choices.

Andrew Carter's arrangement of Autumn Leaves is complex, but interestingly this number stood out memorably. Voices of Exmoor produces a characteristic soft blended sound (another aspect perhaps of One Voice?) which was remarkably appropriate. With fourteen sopranos, plus smaller numbers of supporting voices, it's not a particularly well-balanced choir, but the homogeneous sound which rather beautifully minimises individual timbres overcame many challenges, especially in this particular song.

Another risk was to sing a piece by heart, with no accompaniment. This famous Roberton arrangement of a spiritual, presented early in the programme when the choir was still gathering its confidence, might have run into difficulties, but under Amanda Taylor's attentive and always supportive conducting, was delivered movingly and with conviction.

A further risk was to include a flute for some of the accompaniments, but Hayley Hodges' clean and sensitive playing contributed a lovely extra flavour.

On the subject of accompaniment, Joke Routledge's support demands celebration. Here is a pianist equally at home standing in for an orchestra in a Verdi opera as in a Lloyd Webber or Lionel Bart musical, or a jaunty not to say virtuosic obligato to *When the Saints*.

The selection of the delightfully varied pieces may have been suggested by individual choir members, but the sequencing and presentation came from the musical director.

Her introductions charmingly struck just the right note of informal formality.
And the whole programme described a full circle, with a return to that One Voice – a conclusion that made for an emotional and fulfilling conclusion.

Between these two renderings, we were treated to some lovely singing, touching upon a wide range of emotions – it was a wonderfully emotional evening – all in a superb performing space.
At least one long-time attender of this choir's concerts declared it to be the best ever.

Under the charismatic leadership of Amanda Taylor, Voices of Exmoor can afford to continue to take risks, to win further success, to go on giving delight and pleasure – indeed, nothing less than to offer The Gift of Music, Over the Moor and beyond, whether or not it continues To Teach the World to Sing.

A review by Richard Westcott