

St BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH, ORFORD, SATURDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2013

Aldeburgh Music Club Choir
Thomas Mills High School Senior Choir
Prometheus Brass Ensemble
Conductors: Edmond Fivet/Laura Scott

As its contribution to the weekend of celebrations for the centenary of the birth of its co-founder the Aldeburgh Music Club put on a Tribute to Benjamin Britten at Orford Church on the day following the actual date of his birth

The programme was admirably varied, including not only work by Britten himself but also by Purcell, the English predecessor whom he admired above all others. This was the magnificent Funeral Music for Queen Mary, in which the Choir was joined by the excellent Prometheus Brass Ensemble who had also opened the concert with Britten's rousing Fanfare for St Edmundsbury.

Two works previously commissioned by the Club were also given their second performances. First, Joanna Lee's intriguing and ingenious four-act mini-opera on the legend of the Orford Mermaid (considerably modified since its first performance, to my mind to its benefit in greater simplicity and coherence), in which a section of the Club Choir was joined by the Thomas Mills High School Senior Choir and by Christian White and George Barton performing prodigies of virtuosity on piano and percussion respectively; this was conducted with precision and energy by Laura Scott, a music teacher at the School, greatly to be congratulated for the obviously high standard of musical education at the School. The second commissioned piece was Joseph Phibbs' Choral Songs of Homage, three brief and attractive settings of verse preceded by a rousing setting of the single word 'Praise'.

The remainder of the programme consisted of works by Britten, including three intriguing samples of music stemming from his early left-wing and proselytising pacifist days (of these at least one, the Pacifist March, would be best forgotten - it sounded to me like an inferior version of Ethel Smythe's 'March of the Suffragettes' and I wondered whether there might be an element of tongue in cheek from the young tyro composer, the idea of a pacifists marching surely being an oxymoron). The rest of the works performed represented the products of his genius from his extreme youth to his maturity, ending with his remarkable setting of the National Anthem with its quiet and humble first verse followed by a rousing full-voiced second verse; Her Majesty is said to have remarked on first hearing it that she had been more moved by it than by any other version she had heard, adding dryly 'and one hears it quite often'.

The music was interspersed by speeches from Humphrey Burton, President of the Club, Alan Britten, the composer's nephew and Vice-President of the Club, Joseph Phibbs (introducing his own work), Philip Reed, a previous Director of Music for the Club, and Edmond Fivet who had also conducted the whole concert apart from 'Mermaid' with energy and panache.

Altogether a fitting tribute to a man who was, without doubt, one of the greatest composers of the 20th century not only in this country but in the world, and who lived amongst us here in East Suffolk for almost the whole of his life. Happy Birthday, Ben, wherever you are.

John Sims

26 November 2013