

Doing the Monteverdi thing at Salisbury

Roderic Dunnett hears a new Vespers in a feast of Marian music

echo and reverberate, was breathtaking.

Here were seven or eight of Salisbury's outstanding choirs, each with a different conductor and arrayed around different parts of the Cathedral, delivering in the first

half some of the finest Marian motets composed: a beautifully crisp *Ecce vicit Leo* (Peter Philips) from Sarum Voices; an involving Howells *Salve Regina* from the Farrant Singers (their divided basses especially impressive); the sensational *Ave Maria* by the Tudor composer Robert Parsons, wafted by full cathedral choir from the east end; and Salisbury Community Choir — a first rate, utterly committed ensemble (their finely supported contralto and tenor lines deserve mention) — producing one of the most robustly sustained readings of Gorecki's *Totus Tuus*, written for High Mass during Pope John Paul II's 1987 visit to Warsaw, I can remember.

A former King's College, Cambridge, boy soloist, choral scholar, and later member of the King's Singers, Bob Chilcott has brilliantly carved out a niche, in the wake of John Rutter, as not just one of the great choral motivators, running workshops and energising choirs worldwide, but a composer of highly popular sacred, secular, and Christmas music. His *Canticles of Light*, *Jubilate*, *Credo*, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, his Christmas Cantata *And Peace on Earth*, attractively conceived *The Making of the Drum*, and charming cycle *Singing by Numbers* have all but entered the regular repertoire.

His output encompasses versatile settings of (to name but a few) Whitman, Verlaine, Eluard, Herrick, Blake, Hopkins, Sassoon, G. K. Chesterton, Elizabeth Jennings, and Spike Milligan.

What impressed me most about Chilcott's amiable new *Vespers* is its exciting design — deliberately modelled on Monteverdi's, with opening antiphon, three (in Monteverdi's case it was five) further psalm settings — 109 (*Dixit Dominus*), 112 (*Laudate pueri*), and 122 (*Laetatus sum*), Passiontide hymn, four motets on Marian texts relating to Christmas, the Presentation in the Temple, the Passion, and lastly a Sarum Rite variant of *Ave maris stella*; and — again, like Monteverdi — a sensational, brassy Magnificat to round off.

This was a meaty undertaking by any standards. A proportion of Chilcott's music deliberately embraces the category of what is often termed "good to sing": not claiming to court profundity, but designed to promote the sheer joy of singing. There were hints of that here: a ghastrily blithe set of Kyries preceding his first-rate setting of the Gloria (both from his *A Little Jazz Mass*, and splendidly delivered by the St John Singers under John Powell); a slightly pop-feel interlude invading his fine, Carl Orff-tinged setting of *Dixit Dominus*; a whiff of cloying sentiment at "O pray for the piece of Jerusalem". The main structural weakness seemed an overlong treatment of *Vexilla Regis*, which lost some momentum in its nine-verse version here.

One anonymous 14th-century poem evoked a classic King's Singers-type arrangement: superbly sung, but perhaps not quite harnessing with the rest. A string

quartet prefacing sounded tentative; and virtually all of the choirs struggled to pronounce the open vowel "e".

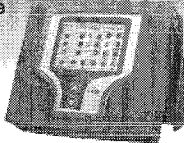
Yet far more important is the way in which Chilcott has risen to the challenge in so much of this new work. His handling of the two orchestras, overseen with Boultian long baton by Salisbury's Director of Music, showed a wonderful resilience, and much sensitivity to the cathedral's ample spaces. A gloriously lithe setting of *Laudate pueri* drew a terrific, lucid response from the vibrant children of Salisbury Cathedral Junior Choir. Chilcott's Howells-like treatment of the Eccard/Troutbeck "When to the temple Mary went" yields an exquisite *envoi* worthy of Maxwell Davies's "Lullaby for Lucy". Brilliantly buoyant antiphonal effects launching Psalm 121 easily outweighed minor later doubts.

Outdoing everything is Bob Chilcott's vital, subtly-worked Latin setting of the Magnificat, split into distinct sections like Monteverdi's, and showing terrific powers of invention; children's voices under Ian Wicks again excelled. The prominent intervals throughout the work — major second, major third, perfect fourth — suggest that Chilcott planned a good proportion of his new work as a musical distillation of Monteverdi's original: certainly, the Mantuan-Venetian composer hovers like a ghostly musical presence beneath the notes of the whole work. It may be this, therefore, that can be viewed as the composer's finest achievement.

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