

Flawless Performance

Choral

Music at Douai: Nonsuch Singers, at Douai Abbey, UpperWoolhampton, on Saturday, March 10

THIS concert was entitled *I am the True Vine* and indeed delivered the promised “beautiful Lenten music for choir and organ”.

The music spanned over four centuries, the earliest by Lassus written in 1564 and the most recent by Pärt in 2001. The programme gave great scope to compare the periods and styles of composers from Spain, Germany, Italy, France, Poland and Estonia, and included music originally for performance at both Protestant and Roman Catholic events. The pieces were linked by the idea of the vine, indeed the words of the *True Vine* appeared in two settings by Schütz and Pärt.

The Nonsuch Singers are a chamber choir of up to 40 voices, based in London, with an active interest in innovative performances and less well-known composers. Giving only around seven concerts a year, Douai was very lucky to secure them for this, their first appearance, and it is to be hoped that the excellent turnout will encourage them to return to Berkshire.

Conductor Graham Caldbeck gave superb leadership and the choir responded with a performance that was flawless, well-balanced, and exciting. Of the many highlights, I would single out Gesualdo's *Vinea mea electa*, (*you are my chosen vine*)

for its warm tone and delicious cadences, Schütz's incisive and jolly setting of the Vine delivered from the back of the abbey church followed by his equally delightful but more polyphonic *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt* (*For God so loved the world*). I also thoroughly enjoyed the *Two Lenten Motets* by Pavel Łukaszewski with its challenging discords on the opening word *Domine*, its leaping intervals together with frequent key and time changes, altogether a huge sound resolving into a soft conclusion imploring the Lord to “*remember me*”.

Interspersed with the singing came a selection of preludes by Bach from the *Orgelbüchlein* (*Little Organ Book*) which included 46 chorale preludes (out of a planned 164). Richard Pearce played these with a variety of tonalities to the great delight of everyone present. In the final piece he also accompanied the choir, who had otherwise been a capella, in Pärt's *Littlemore Tractus*, which was written to celebrate the centenary of a sermon by the (recently beatified) Cardinal Newman at Littlemore church near Oxford. The arresting setting built to a tremendous climax and resolved quietly into repeated octaves on the organ.

After the applause, the choir sang its only English piece, Tallis' *O Nata Lux*, which brought a wonderful evening to a beautifully quiet and satisfying conclusion.

CATHERINE SIDE