

## Leith Hill Musical Festival 2016

The 2016 Leith Hill Musical Festival was a very special occasion, being Brian Kay's 21<sup>st</sup> festival and also his last. As someone who has been singing throughout those 21 years, I can testify that we have all enjoyed a great feast of music-making with Brian. Clearly determined to finish with a flourish, he had chosen Verdi's great *Requiem* as his grand finale for Saturday night's final concert. Now that really is going out with a bang!

The festival began on Thursday with the choirs of Buckland & Betchworth, Capel, Holmbury St Mary and Oxshott. Holmbury St Mary swept the board, winning all the classes except the men's song, where Oxshott were victorious, and the ensemble, where the winners were Buckland & Betchworth no.1 ensemble. The evening concert began with the *Serenade to Music* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. This is a ravishingly beautiful piece of music which is said to have moved Rachmaninov to tears! It was written for a jubilee concert in honour of the great conductor Sir Henry Wood and it was a fitting choice to begin the festival, being a celebration of the art of music itself. The short competition pieces then followed, including a rousing performance by the men of Stanford's *The old superb* (the closing number from his *Songs of the sea*), and a lively rendering of Seiber's *Three Hungarian folksongs*. The trophies were presented by Judith Weir, Master of the Queen's Music, who reminded us all that singing is a most healthy activity - both physically and mentally! After the interval, the main work of the concert was Haydn's *Harmoniemesse*, one of the several mass settings he wrote towards the end of his long life. The performance was confident and convincing, the choirs in good form and supported by the excellent English Festival Orchestra, who play such an important role in the festival each year.

Read Judith Weir's blog on her visit to the Festival at

<http://www.judithweir.com/#!/Dorking/cmbz/57261af50cf2a12871bdc83e>

Friday saw the morning competition fought out between Beare Green & Newdigate, Bookham, Mickleham and Shalford. Mickleham triumphed, winning all the classes except the women's song, where Shalford were victorious. The evening concert began with Schubert's lovely *Mass in G*, written when he was only eighteen, and then followed the shorter competition pieces. The women's song was a most beautiful setting of 'My true love' (words by Sir Philip Sidney) composed by Ian Assersohn, the conductor of Leatherhead choral society. The awards were presented by Dame Sarah Goad, a former Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, and then after the interval we heard music by another composer associated with the festival. This was the *Suite for strings* by our president John Rutter, a delightful work with its four movements based on folksongs. The concert finished with Purcell's *Come ye sons of art*. In this, it was a great pleasure to welcome James Bowman, the distinguished counter-tenor and old friend of Brian, along with the other soloists. The famous duet 'Sound the trumpet' with James and Timothy Travers-Brown (who stepped in at the last minute) was a delight, both musically and visually, as the two singers interacted playfully together.

The final day, Saturday, saw a closely-fought competition between the choirs of Dorking, Epsom, Horsley and Leatherhead. Each of the choirs won at least one class, but Leatherhead emerged as the overall winner, just two points ahead of Epsom. In the ensemble class, the Dorking no.1 ensemble gave a truly magical rendering of *Fain would I change that note* by Vaughan Williams. This not only won them the class, but also gained the highest mark in the entire festival, thereby winning them the additional prize of the William Cole banner. In the own-choice class, Horsley sang an arrangement of *The Good-bye Jazz* by Tom Cunningham, incorporating the words 'Goodbye Brian! Thank you Brian!' I'm told that Brian, sitting up in the balcony, was moved to

tears! Horsley received a tremendous ovation, and Brian must have been pleased as he invited them to sing it again in the evening concert. This they did, with their conductor Val Beynon, to huge applause once again.

The evening concert was performed to a packed Dorking Halls; all seats had been sold out months ago. It began with a brief first half, in which we heard all the short competition pieces, and then the prizes were presented by Mark Stringer, one of the morning's adjudicators. The second half was devoted to Verdi's great *Requiem*. This is one of the overpowering masterpieces of choral music, a great and majestic work, and a fitting grand finale for the festival and for Brian. With the combined forces of four large choirs, four excellent soloists, a greatly expanded English Festival Orchestra and offstage brass, this was an overwhelming experience. All of us performing were deeply moved and I'm sure the audience were too; the applause was tremendous and prolonged. Brian made a short speech, thanking everybody who had contributed to making his 21 years with the festival so enjoyable, and finally everyone joined in singing 'God be with you till we meet again'. After a standing ovation and with the applause still ringing in his ears, Brian left the stage and the Leith Hill Musical Festival.

So the 2016 festival is over and an era is ended. We look forward now to 2017 with our new conductor, Jonathan Willcocks. He will be only the sixth conductor the festival has had since it began in 1905, a fact which emphasises the very special character of this great festival of choral music.

Ian Codd