

Blackburn Cathedral: Saturday 16th November 2013

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Celebrating Benjamin Britten

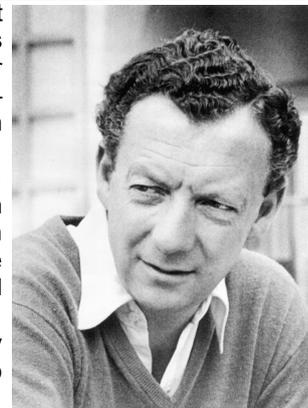
It was a very special concert – for this was (almost to the day) the Centenary of Britten's birth which the Renaissance Singers, directed by **Samuel Hudson** and accompanied by **Shaun Turnbull**, celebrated with one of the most musically polished concerts they have ever given.



And they also sang an exceptionally interesting programme which included many of Britten's finest choral works – his **Te Deum in C** (written when he was only 21 and full of memorable music), his **Missa Brevis** (composed for the choristers of Westminster Cathedral when George Malcolm was their Director of Music), his **Hymn to St. Cecilia** (which is one of his most demanding choral works – calling for rapid changes of tempo, exposed solos (imitating orchestral instruments such as a violin playing open strings, a trumpet, a flute soaring high and a drum beating out rhythm).

The second half of the programme began with Britten's other setting of the **Te Deum**, composed 11 years after his first setting, with a lovely solo sung by the Singers' Chairman, **Alizon Elliott**. Then **Choral Dances** from his Opera *Gloriana* (composed for the 1953 Coronation) and closing with Britten's **Rejoice in the Lamb** composed for the choir of St. Matthew's Church, Northampton (where your editor was DoM for 6 most fruitful years – though it was a few years after Britten had composed this work for that church).

Those of us who knew the words of the various works were able to appreciate the subtleties not only of the choral writing, but also the informed and imaginative interpretation thereof by the singers, who were directed so musically by Samuel Hudson.



Interspersed with Britten's music that evening was music by another English composer, **John Dowland**, who was born exactly 450 years ago. Dowland was a lutenist of distinction but because he was a Catholic he couldn't find employment in the royal service so he lived for some years abroad. He returned to England in 1606 and performed during the funeral on King James I, dying himself the following year. He thought of himself as a melancholy composer, making a Latin pun on his name: *Dowland semper dolens*.

Dowland's quasi polyphonic hymn-like music (which one Singers' bass said was challenging to sing!) made a splendid foil to the more adventurous music of Britten, and this was reinforced by Samuel Hudson asking his singers to stand wherever they liked! i.e. not to have all the sopranos on the front row and the basses at the back. And so for every Dowland piece, (seven of his *Lamentations* were heard) the Singers stood in different formations and the change in their overall sound was amazing. No longer did the sopranos dominate, but all the voices blended into one glorious choral sound – indeed as though they had been put into a blender!

It was a wonderful evening and loud and long was the well-deserved applause.