

Hungarian, folk-like episode just before the recapitulation of the opening *Allegro*; the gloriously songlike playing as each instrument in turn gives out the *Kaiserlied* theme in the variation-form second movement; the daringly measured approach to the sustained Trio section of the third movement, and the fierce drive of the *Presto* finale. There was also a rare chance to hear Samuel Barber's String Quartet in B major which included the celebrated *Adagio* cantilena, passionately delivered. Finally, a magisterial reading of Walton's Second String Quartet in A minor, with the jazzy finale delivered at white heat, brought the concert to an impressive conclusion.

II - Cecilia McDowall: 'God is Light'

One of the leading chamber choirs in East Anglia, the Fairhaven Singers presented a carefully collated recital under their musical director Ralph Woodward in Queens' College Chapel, Cambridge on November 12. Most of the featured pieces were connected with darkness or light and the whole concert traced a simple but inspiring arc from shadows in the first half to radiance in the second.

To begin there were two contrasting settings of *Tenebrae factae sunt* by Carlo Gesualdo and Francis Poulenc, both in superbly controlled readings riven with moments of anguish. There followed an instrumental interlude in the form of Herbert Howells's *Psalm-Prelude* Set 1, no.3 for organ. This noble piece takes as its motto Psalm 23, verse 4: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death'. Ralph Woodward showed great

musicality in unerringly placing the C major climax of the work. The first half concluded with Brahms's rapt and serious motet *Warum ist das Licht gegeben?*, followed by Carl Rüttli's *Lighten our darkness*, written in memory of festival organiser Selene Webb Mills in 2015 and including a call of the yellowhammer in a striking soprano solo.

The opening of the second half mirrored that of the first by offering two very different settings of essentially the same text. Hence, James MacMillan's poignant *Lux aeterna* was followed by György Ligeti's challenging piece of the same name, as immortalised in the soundtrack of Stanley Kubrick's iconic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The Perse Prep Senior Choir, Cambridge then sang *We will remember*, a short, well-crafted piece written by their director Paul Harris which continued the theme of departed souls dwelling in light. The Fairhaven Singers returned for John Rutter's *Hymn to the Creator of Light*. This double-choir anthem was dedicated to the memory of Herbert Howells and that composer's style could be detected occasionally in Rutter's writing. The singers caught the mysteriousness of the antiphonal, quasi-plainsong opening and brought spirit to the driving central episode before calm was restored in the beautifully poised and tranquil final section.

A glowing culmination to the concert was provided by the world premiere of Cecilia McDowall's *God is Light*, performed by the Perse Prep School Choir and the Fairhaven Singers, who commissioned it. This new motet was a quintessence of the evening's overarching trajectory from darkness to light. Hence, it

began with a setting of verse 11 from Psalm 139 'The darkness is no darkness with thee' featuring expressive imitative writing between upper and lower voices and continued with a delicate treatment for upper voices of 'Ye are all children of light' (1 Thessalonians 5, v.5). Between these two settings, McDowall interposed the bright exclamation by children's voices 'God is light', paving the way for the piercing radiance of the combined vocal forces in an extended and increasingly luminous final setting of 'God is light and in him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1, v.5). The blazing conviction of the soaring closing affirmation 'God is light' was a heady experience, especially in such an exalted venue, and it formed a resounding conclusion to an intelligently planned and impressively executed programme.

III - Daphne Oram: 'Still Point' at St John's, Smith Square

A concert by members of the London Contemporary Orchestra held at St John's, Smith Square on June 24 as part of the Southbank Centre's 'Deep Minimalism' festival offered three contrasting examples of the avant-garde movement. The programme began with 'Twenty-three', one of several 'number pieces' by John Cage dating from the last years of his life which take their title from the number of players required – in this case 13 violins, five violas and five cellos of the LCO. The sustained, vibrato-less sonorities delivered at an unwaveringly moderate dynamic level had a mesmeric appeal, though positioned up in the gallery, the players and their tiny textural shifts



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