

Something to Savour – Lamb at Lichfield

Whilst now resident slightly outside our "area", Cathy Lamb is still one of our members, so it seemed appropriate while staying not far away to go and hear her perform on what is now "her own" instrument, that at Lichfield Cathedral, on 13th September.

Her recital was part of a series of Celebrity Recitals put on by the Cathedral. This one was attended by approximately 50 people, most of whom seemed to be local residents. We were seated at the crossing, facing north, so the main part of the instrument, and the console itself, was well above us and to our right. We were given a view of the console via large-screen CCTV, complete with a picture-in-picture view of the pedalboard.

The works covered a range of periods and styles, but are all among Cathy's favourite pieces. They showed off the versatility of the organ and the virtuosity of the organist (nimble assisted in the registration department by her husband Ben).

Cathy began with an arrangement by Francis Walker of Richard Wagner's "Procession of the Mastersingers" showing both the depth of tone available from the instrument and the clarity with which she made the theme show through amongst the array of big chords.

The obligatory sample of the works of J.S.Bach followed, this being the Prelude and Fugue in C Minor (BWV546), played with Cathy's usual crispness and apparently-effortless authority.

To take us to the interval, we had Percy Whitlock's Five Short Pieces with contrasting romantic strings and flutes, and (as solo voices) some of the tremendous number of reed stops available on this organ. It was during this series of pieces that we noticed some new sounds coming from our left; these were from the Nave Organ, which made possible some stereo effects to add to the occasion.

An unusual Reger piece, his Scherzo in D Minor, started the second half. As the programme notes pointed out, this is noteworthy for signs of wit and good humour - not something usually associated with this composer.

Two French pieces followed - the Fantaisie in E flat by Saint-Saens and an arrangement by Robert Husson of the Pavane by Gabriel Faure. Those who know the Saint-Saens will remember the contrast between the alternating chords of the first movement and the passionate, fiery cascade of the second, with its syncopated pedal part roving right across the compass. The Faure just floats its theme tune above a serene accompaniment, while sometimes playing with the listeners' sense of tonality.

For the final two pieces we were transported from France to the USA with the Charles Ives Variations on America and (to my great delight) a transcription of Sousa's "Liberty Bell" march. Both pieces deserve - and got - a broad-brush treatment, uninhibitedly joyful in approach. The Ives, of course, is famous for the bi-tonal passages (each hand playing in a different key), which sounded just as strange as was promised. The Sousa is a great romp, just right for the occasion, and had a good few feet tapping in time - in the audience.

All in all, a splendid evening. It would have been nice to see more local support for Cathy's endeavours, and I am not convinced that the large-screen display is completely wonderful, but in Lichfield and far beyond the lady herself, with her husband, make a potent force for good in music. Long may their partnership continue.

Paul Minchinton