

Come and Sing with Bob Chilcott

A while ago I received an email advertising an opportunity to sing music composed and directed by Bob Chilcott. This appealed to me as occasions to sing music written and directed by the composer are rare so I hastily booked my place. It coincided with the royal wedding so 'Catch Up' came into it's own!

The venue was the Regent Hall in Oxford Street, London. It was conveniently situated near Oxford Circus tube station. We were admitted at 10.0am and discovered a selection of music on our chairs including Christmas Tide, The Real of Heart, Five Passion Hymns, A Little Jazz Mass and Be Thou My Vision, the latter being the only one I knew; all written by Bob Chilcott who is a former member of The King's Singers and an international conductor and composer.

Alison Fisher, Chair of the RSCM London welcomed everyone and thanked her committee for organising the event. We were fortunate to be accompanied by the King-Cave Collective with Ewan King on piano, Chris Little on percussion and Victor Obsust on string bass. This ensemble has played jazz at many sacred venues including St Paul's Cathedral. There were about 120 singers taking part from 11 years upwards. We were lucky to have no less than eleven tenors in our midst. People who sing will acknowledge that top-notch tenors are quite a rare breed and tend to receive special treatment!

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The morning session started with the obligatory vocal warm-up before we began learning The Real of Heart. Bob encourage us to try to sing whole phrases and shape them correctly. The Regent Hall has a high ceiling and splendid acoustics which was a real benefit. It was a very moving piece written by Bob in memory of organist John Scott who died suddenly in 2015. Quite emotional.

We moved on, by complete contrast, to The Little Jazz Mass, an exuberant piece written by Bob in 2004 for a choir in New Orleans which as everyone knows is the home of jazz. This piece was well outside my comfort zone! Some of the choir had thankfully sung it before and were able to help the rest of us. One church choir intended to sing part of it the next day as part of their service. The Gloria had quite a punchy rhythm in sharp contrast to the more laid back style of the Sanctus and Agnus Dei. In the end I found myself warming to this piece even singing parts of it to myself on the way home.

A break for lunch afforded an opportunity to chat to other singers. Bob signed some music people had bought while one or two tuned in to the royal wedding on their i-phones. Bob had a wry sense of humour and asked the question:

“What do you call an alto?” Answer: “A soprano who can read music!” or “a low woman!”.

Lunch over we sang There is a Green Hill to Bob’s arrangement (from Five Passion Hymns); a fairly simple piece and quite easy to sing. *The sound of 120 voices was quite beautiful* Bob related another story of how a lady had asked him why the alto line in one of his settings was so boring (brave lady!) He thought about this and taking it on board wrote an alto line in his next piece that was really challenging and had to be worked on!

Friends and family joined us in the afternoon when we sang Be Thou My Vision. Apparently someone had told Bob that if we didn’t sing that piece she would be demanding a refund!

Bob appeared very moved and asked the choir to sing it again; praise indeed from the actual composer. It must be a wonderful experience for a composer to hear their work being sung by a large choir while they conduct.

I had enjoyed a most rewarding and uplifting day. Bob Chilcott is a revelation with the ability to motivate nervous singers into believing they can attempt quite challenging compositions. A memorable experience. Thank you Bob.

Yvonne Sowerby