

AN UNFORGETTABLE EVENING

Ripon Cathedral was packed to capacity on Saturday 10 March for Harrogate Choral Society's exciting performance of two modern works: The Armed Man by Karl Jenkins and David Fanshawe's African Sanctus.

The Armed Man was commissioned by the Royal Armouries to commemorate the Millennium. The work is subtitled: A Mass for Peace and was dedicated to the people of Kosovo, who were in the throes of war when Jenkins was writing it. All this suggests some turbulent music, and so it is, but it leads to a prayer to God to have mercy before considering the after-effects of war. When peace has once more been established, it is time to reflect on what devastating effects war produces and looks forward to the hope of a more peaceful world. A piece with such conflicting emotions requires a competent set of musicians to pull it off satisfactorily and choir, soloists and instrumentalists did just that. It was delightful to have such young soloists too, who all did themselves proud, especially contralto Beth Mackay, who sang 'Now the guns have stopped' sensitively and expressively. The young bass, Miles Taylor has a voice which already has a richness about it. The haunting cello solo precluding the Benedictus was enchanting, soaring beautifully into the heights of the cathedral, the theme to be then taken up by the choir with a quiet poignancy. This work had many high notes for the sopranos but they generally soared magnificently to those lofty heights. Tenors and Basses were not quite synchronised at the start of 'Be merciful unto me, O God', otherwise the choir was generally balanced and precise throughout.

Following the interval, the choir and conductor abandoned their white shirts and blouses and came back in an array of coloured tops for the African Sanctus. David Fanshawe conceived the driving force of this work as being 'one of praise and a firm belief in one music – one God'. It is a kind of musical documentary and combines African and Western styles, the latter in the form of the Latin Mass. Something of the flavour of Africa was present in the pre-recorded sounds which the composer made on location in various countries. These included the sounds of frogs, rain and thunder as well as both children and adults chanting or singing some traditional songs. Coupled with the contribution of The Mighty Zulu Nation Dancers, this was a quite spectacular performance. There was only a soprano soloist this time and Maureen Brathwaite entered into the spirit of the piece magnificently. Her delightfully radiant smile made her an especially attractive performer. At the conclusion of the work came two encores, firstly the Sanctus was repeated with some members of the audience invited to join in with the Zulu dancers to dance up and down the main aisle; then a repeat of the Lord's Prayer really was the final item.

All credit to Andrew Padmore and the Harrogate Choral Society for providing such a splendid evening. Praise too for the extremely versatile percussionists, Backbeat Percussion Quartet, who displayed great professionalism throughout.

Cynthia Wood