Music for troubled times lifts the spirit and warms the heart

It may have felt just above freezing on Saturday night outside All Saints Church, Otley, but inside, the massed forces of Ilkley and Otley Choral Societies soon made a hugely appreciative audience forget about the cold.

The two choirs, who rehearse separately on different nights of the week, but come together four times a year for their concerts, were directed with strong leadership and accuracy by their musical director Alex Kyle and, for this concert, joined by four wonderful soloists and supported by the Yorkshire Chamber Ensemble with organist John Longstaff.

This was a very ambitious programme, but one which was performed deftly by all concerned. The evening began with Haydn's *Nelson* Mass, subtitled a *Mass for Troubled Times* (at the time of composition, Austria was struggling in the wars against Napoleon); the choice of piece shows the care taken over the curation of this programme, allowing us to reflect on our own troubled times as we listened. The orchestra's powerful unison notes of the opening set the tone immediately, matched later with clarity and precision from the choir intoning the word *Kyrie* with great confidence. This paved the way for soprano Alysia Hanshaw to expand upon and decorate the phrase with detailed accuracy and much delicacy, repeated in her beautiful soaring melodies at the end of the movement. Haydn gives each of the soloists time to shine throughout the work. The richness of mezzo soprano Phoebe Rayner's middle range partnered the other soloists perfectly in the Agnus Dei. Tenor Leo Fullwell's tone production was spot on at all times and worked beautifully when duetting with bass Matthew Secombe, who stood out in his showpiece *Qui tollis*, displaying his particularly strong upper range.

No less impressive was the orchestra, some of the region's finest players coming together to provide near-faultless support for the choir and soloists. Haydn's boss Prince Esterházy had recently dismissed the wind players from his orchestra to save money (perhaps another reference to troubled times, both then and also happening now), so Haydn wrote for a reduced orchestra of three trumpets, timpani, organ and strings; the Yorkshire Chamber Ensemble were always tight and responsive throughout the whole programme.

The combined choir was at the top of its game, right from the very start of the Haydn, responding well to the conductor and other musicians. Particularly impressive was its ability to change mood quickly and efficiently, through the use of a full dynamic range. It's always arresting to hear a large number of musicians sing quietly and there were some very special moments in both the Haydn and the Duruflé *Requiem*, the other piece in the programme. The Duruflé is a gorgeous piece of music, but notoriously tricky for amateur singers to undertake. There was some very secure singing, particularly with the whole choir's unison plainchant; at the start, this was bang in tune, only slipping slightly towards the end of the work. Diction was always

precise and the Latin text of both works could be heard clearly at all times. Soloists Phoebe Rayner and Matthew Secombe excelled again in this work, although their position, in front of the choir and behind the orchestra, led to a slight imbalance and it would have been wonderful to have Phoebe and the solo cellist work closer together in the beautifully performed *Pie Jesu*.

What impressed me most about the performance was the bringing together of all these disparate forces, under the skilled guidance and leadership of Alex Kyle. Two choirs who rehearse separately, four soloists from different parts of the country and a group of instrumentalists who come together occasionally – all these musicians combining to create a single musical community was extraordinary. We may also be living in troubled times, but the standard of musicianship was so high on Saturday night, with amateur and professional forces coming together to create a hugely memorable event, one which shows how the power of community music-making can lift the spirit for both performers and audience.

Pete Stollery

(662 words)