

REVIEW: Mastering glorious harmonies

Wokingham Choral Society
Saturday, March 4

It is rare to attend a concert which features solely the music of 17th century composer Henry Purcell.

Master of glorious harmony and intricate counterpoint, Purcell's works *Come Ye Sons of Art*, *Funeral Sentences* and the opera *Dido and Aeneas* showcase the variety of his output. The choir were accompanied by the specially formed Hampstead Chamber Orchestra. Featuring several period instruments, the members with more portable instruments stood throughout, enabling greater communication and expressiveness, and performed with style and sensitivity.

The choir engaged the audience from their first moment with clear diction and remarkable dynamic contrasts. Interspersed by soloists and instrumental items the lyrics – a poem by Nahum Tate – extol the various virtues of Queen Mary, for whose birthday it was composed.

For the *Funeral Sentences*, composed for the funeral of Queen Mary, the brass and percussion sections came to the fore, accompanied by the Great Hall's magnificent organ. With the music fitting perfectly to the text of these sentences from the Book of Common Prayer, the choir was divided into chorus and semi-chorus and used the luscious harmony to communicate the words with great feeling.

Dido and Aeneas featured each of the four soloists taking on different roles in the opera, the incredible counter-tenor giving a convincing portrayal of the wicked sorceress. With different sections of the choir representing various groups of characters, a highlight of this work was a semi-chorus of five sopranos from the choir acting as witches and the cackling from the chorus in reply. This semi-acted performance of Purcell's first opera was rather enjoyable.

The partnership of Wokingham Choral Society with Hampstead Chamber Orchestra can be experienced again on Sunday April 2nd at All Saint's Church, Wokingham, where they will perform the beautiful *St John Passion* by J S Bach.

JUDITH CREIGHTON