

BANQUETING HOUSE CONCERT

Dyson, Bax Parry and Stravinsky performed by the Whitehall Choir with the Longfordbrown Piano Duo conducted by Paul Spicer; Monday 11 July 2011.

Events staged at Inigo Jones's 1622 Banqueting House in Whitehall, that glorious survival from the long-lost Palace of Whitehall otherwise burned down in 1698, always have a special quality. For the atmosphere and décor, for the resonant acoustic and for the historical associations of the very place where King Charles I stepped onto the scaffold. So the Whitehall Choir's concert on a lovely summer evening, Monday 11 July 2011, had everything in its favour, and found the choir in top form on a notably good night. The concert was given with the Longfordbrown Piano Duo and conducted by Paul Spicer, and presented a fascinating programme which in the event proved perfectly judged for the acoustic.

Sir George Dyson's *The Blacksmiths* has been recorded in versions for choir with two pianos and percussion and also for full orchestra. Here we had a version for two pianos without the percussion or the extensive tympani part. Conductor Paul Spicer, who has recently completed his mammoth study of Dyson and his music, brought the insights of a man who has studied this music closely. Thus the shaping and dynamics of the performance were grippingly attuned to the subject, the onomatopoeia of the words reflected in their presentation. Dyson's father had been a blacksmith and this work certainly must have been written in tribute to him.

Parry's last choral work, the sixth and longest number of his late *Songs of Farewell*, a soaring setting of verses from Psalm 39 'Lord, let me know mine end and the number of my days' was composed only months before Parry's own death. The music needs a resonant acoustic to make its full impact and here the counterpoint soared gloriously.

The piano duo James Longford and Lindy Tennent-Brown supported the choir admirably in the Dyson and Stravinsky (see below) and were a revelation in *Moy Mell* by Arnold Bax, a wayward escapist tone-poem written during the First World War for Bax's Academy contemporaries the celebrated pianists Myra Hess and Irene Scharrer. It was also played by Bax himself with his mistress Harriet Cohen. Here my fears that the acoustic would result in a blurring of the textures proved groundless, the pianists' beautifully soft-edged presentation of Bax's celtic melodic outlines and chromatic teasing worked wonderfully well in the acoustic where the duo found an orchestral sensibility in the music. For me this was quite the most successful realisation I have heard of Bax's evocation of Irish mythology, written only five months after the Easter Rising, a work which is usually played too brusquely.

The concert ended with a chorally poised and secure traversal of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* in a version with the usually severe orchestral accompaniment made even more Spartan in a reduction by Robert W. Jones for two pianos. This worked very well and especially threw up various parallels with later works that I for one had not noticed before, not least the *Symphony in Three Movements*. Again the acoustic worked in favour of the performance bringing an unexpected warmth to music that it often made to sound aggressive and distant.

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