

## Choir brings out the best in Beethoven

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Soloists at The Llewellyn Choir concert. Photo: Peter Hislop

*Music / "Beethoven". The Llewellyn Choir. At Llewellyn Hall, ANU School of Music, July 6. Reviewed by CLINTON WHITE*

**AS it turned out, Rowan Harvey-Martin's decision to program an all-Beethoven concert for The Llewellyn Choir was visionary, coming as it did, just after a recent ABC Classic poll put the master at number one. So, there was the buzz of anticipation.**

The Llewellyn Sinfonia opened with the Egmont Overture, from the incidental music to Goethe's powerful play, "Egmont", about liberation from tyranny. Beethoven's adopted Vienna was under French oppression and, for him, "Egmont" represented hope for democratic freedom.

The opening section was a tad slow and tentative, but it wasn't long before the band hit its straps, building the piece to a triumphant conclusion. In what was to become the hallmark of this concert, Harvey-Martin had excellent control, the orchestra responding with truly lovely expression. At times the brass and woodwinds overpowered the strings, drowning out the melody, but overall it was an exhilarating performance.

The "Choral Fantasy" was next, with the orchestra joined by The Llewellyn Choir, pianist Anthony Smith and soloists, Greta Claringbould and Jennifer Bennett (soprano), Ellen Malone (mezzo), Paul McMahon and Peter Ellis (tenor) and Christopher Richardson (bass).

Beethoven had dashed it off just before the infamous four-hour concert in Vienna on December 22, 1808. There was no heating, the musicians were under-rehearsed and the premiere of the "Choral Fantasy", in which Beethoven himself played the piano part, fell to pieces and had to be stopped part-way through and started again.

Its main theme is seen as a pre-cursor to the famous "Ode to Joy" in the last movement of the 9th symphony. I could also hear a nod to Mozart's "Magic Flute".

The piano features mightily and Anthony Smith was brilliant in the many technically demanding passages. His fluid style created some wonderful textures and made this difficult work look easy. Harvey-Martin created "just right" orchestral balance and, when the singers joined in, more than halfway through, the piece rose to a thrilling climax.

Anthony Smith's encore – the andante from Beethoven's 10th piano sonata – was no less demanding. His was an enchanting performance of its disjointed chordal structure, jolting the audience back to reality in the perfectly executed crashing final chord.

The major piece was Beethoven's Mass in C, commissioned by Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, grandson of Haydn's patron, for the name day of his wife. The Haydn connection made Beethoven nervous. Esterházy hated the work, but it is much-loved today.



Rowan Harvey-Martin conducts The Llewellyn Choir. Photo: Peter Hislop

Despite its quiet ending, it's a quite muscular work that requires an assertive performance. The soloists were in fine voice, although the bass, Christopher Richardson, and mezzo Ellen Malone, struggled to fill the hall over the orchestral and choral forces. Soprano Greta Claringbould and tenor, Paul McMahon, came through clearly.

In all but the "Agnus Dei", where there were some uncertain entries, The Llewellyn Choir performed magnificently. Harvey-Martin drew exquisite blending, tone and expression with fine orchestral balance and the thundering chords and bass line by organist James Porteous added "grunt".

This concert proved emphatically why Beethoven gets the winner's trophy.