

'Hope!' full and heartwarming concert



Llewellyn Choir Conducted by Rowan Harvey-Martin – To Hope.

Photo by Peter Hislop.

Music / "To Hope!", The Llewellyn Choir. At the Chapel of the Annunciation, Canberra Girls Grammar School, October 18. Reviewed by IAN McLEAN

'To Hope!' was a most appropriate title for this uplifting and heart warming concert, designed by talented conductor Rowan Harvey-Martin, of music associated with the Roman Catholic Mass but performed with a distinct and prominent jazz flavour.

Will Todd is best known for his jazz setting 'Mass in Blue' and his anthem 'The Call to Wisdom' which was commissioned and performed for the Diamond Jubilee Thanksgiving Service for Her Majesty the Queen.

His Cantata, 'Lights, Stories Noise, Dreams, Love and Noodles' was commissioned for The Bach Choir and it was this piece which opened tonight's concert in quite spectacular fashion. The work comprises 8 songs, interspersed with 3 poems, which

portray images of London. The 21 member Gabriel Singers, comprising girls from Year 9 to 12, is the Canberra Girls Grammar School premier choral group and they were the featured artists. What an absolute musical delight they were! With most pleasing clear and clean diction and powerful, beautifully pitched tone the Singers laid down rhythms with bass and drums then explored the resultant patterns. There was light jazz rock, slow swing and a very funky 'Noodles' where the girls 'jazz-chanted' about the love of food. Throughout the 25 minute cantata the Llewellyn Choir itself provided vocal backing to the Singers whilst progressive and inventive jazz drifted in and out thanks to a fantastic band of 4 of the best Canberra jazz musicians – Michael Dooley (piano), Rouslan Babajanov (saxophone), James Luke (bass) and Derrick Brassington (drums).

This delightful work created the very happy atmosphere evident in the Chapel and it prevailed in the second Todd piece, a short setting of texts from the Mass, sung in Latin, and again written in a variety of jazz styles. Improvisations from Dooley and Babajanov sat most comfortably over the solid rhythms set up by bass and drums (and percussionist Christina Hopgood). The Gabriel Singers led through a jazz waltz 'Kyrie', a jazz rock style 'Gloria' and gentle 'Sanctus' and 'Agnus Dei' contrasted with a quite furious 'Benedictus'. The young singers again displayed absolute confidence in their ability to interpret the varied styles and filled the Chapel with glorious sound. As with the opening piece the Llewellyn Choir primarily provided the 'backing vocals'. There were tentative moments and some insecurity regarding positive entries but internal balance was fine, and sound, once established, was big and solid.

The Choir came into its own more so after interval with 'To Hope!, A Celebration', written by Dave Brubeck as a serious piece reflecting the American Catholic experience but retained within the parameters of the traditional and ritual Mass.

Unlike the Todd pieces, where the jazz was more interactive with the vocal lines, in the Brubeck the choir established the musical foundations then the jazz band took over to announce jazz variations on the sung themes.

There were 15 movements and the band was joined by James Porteus (organ), Clara Tenniswood (cello) and Melissa Fung (double bass). It was an interesting sidelight just to listen to the different styles of writing for the jazz bass and the orchestral bass.

Soloists Andrew Fysh (bass), Jenny Sawyer (soprano) and Rev Dr Tim Watson (tenor) joined the Choir in a most accomplished presentation of the Mass. The choir was rich and powerful particularly in 'Holy, Holy, Holy' and the 'Great Amen' then light and lovely with 'Lamb of God' and the very pretty tune of 'All my Hope'.

The deep resonance of Andrew Fysh led the 'Processional', Jenny Sawyer sang a touching 'The Desert and the Parched Land', which included inventive scat riding over the driving band, and Rev Watson wrenched at the heart with the mournful 'While He Was at Supper', sadness exemplified by the plodding atmospheric jazz

rhythm. The 'Alleluia' featured the famous Brubeck 5/4 time signature with the demanding and exacting rhythmic patterns most capably handled by all.

Conductor Harvey-Martin controlled the many strands of this musical bow with great surety and positive clear direction. She produced and directed an adventurous and innovative concert which brought great pleasure to an appreciative audience.

It was performed on just the one night. A shame, as work of this standard deserves to be seen by many thousands more!!