

Formidable musical forces gather for major work



Soloist Sonia Anfiloff, conductor Rowan Harvey-Martin and the Llewellyn Choir.
Photo: Steve Shaw

Music / “Mass in Blue – jazz-inspired settings of the Latin Mass”, The Llewellyn Choir. At Yarralumla Uniting Church, October 28. Reviewed by IAN MCLEAN.

HAVING now performed three or four successful concerts of British composer Will Todd’s music, Rowan Harvey-Martin has not only become a champion of the work of this gifted writer, but also an expert at interpreting and presenting his complex, but always fascinating, music.

This latest concert was another fine example with a memorable and most entertaining evening presented under the banner of the Llewellyn Choir and “Jazz Missa Brevis / Mass in Blue – Jazz-inspired settings of the Latin Mass”.

Formidable musical forces gathered in the Yarralumla Uniting Church for the major work, “Mass in Blue”, and a literal short mass, “Jazz Missa Brevis”. The 40-strong choir was joined by an outstanding band comprising four of Canberra’s leading jazz exponents – Andrew Hackwill (saxophones), John Black (piano), James Luke (bass) and Derrick Brassington (drums), along with soloist, soprano Sonia Anfiloff.

Born in 1970, Todd studied composition in the classical tradition and wrote an oratorio, “St Cuthbert” and an opera, “The Blackened Man”, before specialising in choral work with “The Call of Wisdom”, commissioned for Queen Elizabeth’s Diamond Jubilee. He gained world-wide attention and recognition when his jazz-influenced arrangement of “Amazing Grace” was performed at both President Obama’s Inauguration Day prayer service and the Nelson Mandela Thanksgiving Service.

The short mass opened the program with a pretty jazz waltz “Kyrie” followed by a Latin-feel “Gloria” before a delicate soft rock “Sanctus”, which featured soaring choir sopranos working in conjunction with the haunting Hackwill soprano saxophone.

The “Credo” is omitted in the short mass, but the lovely soft rock “Benedictus” displayed clever interplay between piano and the dynamically well-controlled and enthusiastic voices of the choir. A variety of styles completed the first half.

Harvey-Martin was joined by accomplished pianist Anthony Smith to present another musical side of Todd – “Ballad of the Fading Light”, a peaceful repetition of piano chords over a reflective violin melody that broadened into pastoral imagery, perfectly timed as twilight took over from the Yarralumla setting sun.

Then a perfectly sung (and perfectly timed) nod to Sir Paul McCartney, currently on tour in Australia, with the excellent Tobias Cole leading the vocal ensemble, Vocal Fry, performing two Beatles classics, “Blackbird” and “Let it Be”. Fans of The Idea of North vocal style relished the inventive harmonies, clean diction and joy in performing evident in this talented group. “Mass in Blue” occupied the second half and it was great!

The well trained Llewellyn Choir captured the contrasting jazz styles with confidence, clarity, good internal balance and competent understanding of often tricky syncopation. And they swung! The band was excellent, as expected, as it effortlessly moved as one from one tempo and style to another. Faster swing sections were enthralling as were the complex rhythmic patterns set up by piano and drums.

The James Luke bass introduction to the “Benedictus” was clarity personified and provided the perfect avenue for vocal basses and tenors to take over and develop. Well balanced interaction between sopranos and soprano saxophone featured in the gentle “Sanctus” and soaring Sonia Anfiloff solos in the Porgy and Bess-like “Agnus Dei”, then the “Credo” reprise finale, were spine tingling.

All was clearly and concisely directed by Harvey-Martin, a Canberra musician and conductor of international standing. This was a fine concert fully appreciated by a discerning, knowledgeable audience.