

Audience delights at choir's change of program



Invictus, conducted by Rowan Harvey-Martin. Photo: Peter Hislop.

*Music / Invictus: A Passion, The Llewellyn Choir. At Wesley Uniting Church, April 13. Reviewed by **HELEN MUSA.***

The sense of relief in the audience that the Llewellyn Choir was doing something other than traditional Palm Sunday fare was palpable as people packed into both downstairs and upstairs of Wesley Uniting Church for a performance of English composer Howard Goodall's *Invictus*.

The 55-minute oratorio for soloists, chorus and small orchestra, which was first commissioned by and performed for a Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, in 2018, offers a fresh look on the coming season, observing the passion and death of Christ.

The name, like that of the Invictus Games, is derived from the Latin word for “unconquered”, and is taken from a very famous poem of the same name by British poet, William Ernest Henley.

In searching for a suitable text, Goodall has, with a few small exceptions, rejected the traditional excerpts from the Christian gospels and rather turned to English poetry to reflect upon the final hours of the life of Jesus.

Goodall has argued that much of the Passion story —persecution of the innocent, malevolent authority and the power of a peaceful, loving humility in the face of tyranny, holds resonance for people of many faiths and those of none.

He also turns the spotlight on women in the story of Christ's passion and the wider humanistic narrative, so draws on the poetry of women, not least by Emilia Lanier Bassano, (maybe the real Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets) Christina Rossetti and African-American abolitionist, Frances Ellen Watkins .

Although the work *Invictus* itself would have sufficed for an evening of music, conductor Rowan Harvey-Martin chose to begin with a joyous rendition of Georg Philippe Telemann's *Hosanna Dem Sohne David*, featuring a full-bodied performance from the choir, with arias and recitative from soloists Aliana McKenzie, Michael Wilson and Alyssa Morse.



Pianist Anthony Smith. Photo: Peter Hislop.

There followed a rare opportunity for pianist Anthony Smith, normally seen in a supportive role, to shine as soloist in Gerald Finzi's *Eclogue* for piano and strings. Here Smith engaged in a music debate with a carefully selected chamber orchestra.

After a short interval it was time for *Invictus*, which is what most of the audience had come to see.

The oratorio began with the lilting strains of Part I, *Gethsemane*, to words by Emilia Lanier, Christina Rossetti and Ella Wheeler Wilcox a strangely catchy score considering events in the garden of Gethsemane. The deceptively light extract from Wilcox's poem *Gethsemane* introduced the clear, penetrating tenor voice of Charles Hudson.

There followed Part II, *Lamentation*, themed around Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's tragic depiction of an African slave market. This did not seem well integrated into the work and the text sung by soprano soloist Sarah Mann proved hard to follow.



Soloists Sarah Mann and Charles Hudson. Saxophonist Andrew Hackwill at rear. .
Photo: Peter Hislop.

Things picked up in the Part 3 chorale, *His Paths are Peace*, where the choir was shown to full effect and Part 4, *Compassion*, inspired by the story of Irena Sendler, a Polish nurse whose personal interventions saved the lives of Jewish children in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The central piece, *Invictus*, was based on Henley's famous words sung by Hudson and the choir, before the longest piece of the afternoon, *Golgotha*, to words by Lanier, where the rhythm returns to the lilting style with which the work had begun. By now things were swinging.

Particular mention must be made of Max McBride's bass, which punctuated much of the oratorio; Andrew Hackwill's tenor saxophone, producing a sound the composer believed was the nearest a wind instrument can get to the sound of human keening, and to the horns of Carly Brown and Dianne Tan, who added colour to the drama of the concluding sections.

In the final three segments of the work, there is a sense that by now Goodall was cramming in ideas of mercy, faith and protest, with music composed to texts by Alfred Houseman, Rossetti, WB Yeats, William Wilberforce, Lanier, George Herbert and finally, returning to Henley's words: "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."

You could hardly wipe the smiles off the faces of the choir members as they left the church after an evening of singing that was plainly as enjoyable to them as it was to the audience.