

GLORIA! (Grayshott Concerts)
Saturday 16 February. St. Luke's Church, Grayshott.

The latest innovation by the enterprising Grayshott Concerts was unveiled at St. Luke's Church on Saturday, masterminded as ever by the indefatigable Peter and Vivien Harrison. This time it was the first appearance of a specially formed chamber choir, Excelsis, conducted by Robert Lewis. Two star soloists, Judith Howarth and Yvonne Fontane were heavily featured also, together with members of the New London Sinfonia. Surely few villages of comparable size can offer such delights.

Eased in gently with Mozart's Laudate Dominum and Fauré's Cantique de Jean Racine, the choir made an immediate impression with its smooth tone, perfect balance and elegant phrasing. Later, in Vivaldi's Gloria, it was able to show its rhythmic vitality and close attention to dynamic levels. What is more, in the final fugue, the separate voice parts were always clearly defined, all a great credit to the conductor. If I could offer one piece of advice, it might be to attack initial consonants harder.

Though adored by the packed audience, the soloists were less rewarding. Both renowned as opera singers – Howarth was the star of the recent Madam Butterfly at the Coliseum, whilst Fontane's calling card is Carmen, they seemed less than happy in the world of the Baroque, where every note must be hit dead centre and every semi-quaver clearly articulated. Both seemed more concerned in presenting us with a general picture, and their heads were permanently buried in their scores, suggesting unfamiliarity with the music. This is not to criticise either singer, but a personal response to hearing them in this particular style of music.

Pergolesi's Stabat Mater suffered worst, with a good deal of approaching notes from below, though happily Judith Howarth steadied her tone to give much pleasure in the sublime Mozart aria.

But the evening belonged to Excelsis, and I hope that we can hear them again soon in something more demanding, with less reliance on soloists. Congratulations to them and their conductor on a highly auspicious debut

Tom Muckley.

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