

## Windfire Christmas Concert, 2016

Music at the Basilica's Christmas concert was held on Friday 16<sup>th</sup> December and featured Windfire Choir and Instrumental Ensemble, excellent soloists, and conductor Rick Prakhoff. St Mary's Basilica, looking beautiful with the sun setting through the stained glass windows, was packed with faces old and new, all of us there for a special night of music.

The opening was an interesting collection of different settings of the Advent carol *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, showing just how very different one piece can sound. An Organ Fantasia, organ variation and a string variation interspersed three settings by David Willcocks in which we heard firstly the warm, round voice of Siam Williams, then the tune sung in unison by the altos then with soprano descant added, and finally with the whole choir. Of the instrumental pieces, I particularly enjoyed the string variation arranged by Austin Harning, which took the carol to its furthest point with some complex rhythms and harmonies. The selection concluded with a beautiful, simple and slightly folksy arrangement by McDonald & Nelson for cello and piano which left the audience spell bound.

Next up was a very enjoyable Nativity Sonata for 2 organs, played by Frank De Rosso and Beverly Phillips. With one organ in the choir loft and the other near the altar, there was a great antiphonal sound and we could have been forgiven for thinking we were in St Mark's in Venice rather than St Mary's in Geelong.

The French carol *Il est né le divin enfant* was a concert highlight. The soprano voices of Windfire Scholars, Brianna Ekberg, Aurora Harmathy and Grace Leaming blended beautifully in a simple arrangement which was accompanied by a cello, a repeating drum beat and two recorders, giving a delightfully medieval sound.

A few centuries and a quick trip across the English Channel took us to the south of England during WW1 for the deservedly popular *The Lark Ascending* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, performed by Hilary Hayes (violin) and Regina Thoma (piano). The whole audience was, in their imagination, lying on soft grass on a gentle summer's day, looking up to a blue sky where a lark is singing, floating on currents, swooping and finally disappearing, thanks to Hilary Hayes' effortless and expert playing.

Telemann's Christmas Cantata "*Was gleicht dem Adel wahren Christen*" demonstrated soprano Lee Abrahmsen's expressiveness and vocal flexibility with many florid runs in the arias, but she was not heard to full advantage because of balance issues with the accompanying harpsichord, bassoon and oboe.

After the interval, we heard a wonderful performance of Mozart's Mass in C KV220, the major work of the concert. The choir sang well throughout, and was extremely responsive to Rick Prakhoff's clear conducting e.g. their forté in the opening Kyrie, which filled St Mary's with glorious sound, their haunting, pianissimo *misere nobis* and dark, descending chromaticism in the *Crucifixus*. The four soloists, Lee Abrahmsen (soprano), Belinda Paterson (mezzo), Michael Petruccelli (tenor) and Nicholas Dinopoulos (bass baritone), made a great sound in four-part written sections such as the *Agnus Dei*. This mass is, however, a vehicle for the soprano soloist and we were fortunate to hear Lee Abrahmsen's wonderful voice now clearly soaring over the Basilica in solo sections such as *Tantum Ergo*. Mass in C KV220 is also called Spatzen-Messe or Sparrow Mass because of the "chirp chirp" in the *Sanctus* which was well executed by Windfire Instrumental Ensemble, whose excellent playing throughout supported the singers and enriched the Mass.

Whilst some may have liked to hear more from Windfire Choir or a more consistent Christmas theme, for others this was just the right kind of concert to offset never-ending muzak carols. The varied and well thought-out program included some of the less usual carols in unusual settings, balanced by the always-enjoyable Mozart and Vaughan Williams. It was an example of how very good music can be in Geelong, and of the high standard of performance from musicians and singers, most of whom were local.

Irene McGinnigle