

Sacred Words perfectly presented

The Seven Last Words of Christ, Windfire Choir and Orchestra conducted by Joseph Hie, Basilica of St Mary of the Angels, Yarra St, April 8, 2022.

Despite its simple title, this was a mammoth sacred work made all the more difficult by pandemic postponements, restrictions and last-minute replacements.

The titular seven 'Words' are in fact eight distinct oratorios, each based on statements credited to Christ while dying on the cross.

They're sung in Latin based on priests' regular narrations that developed over centuries into chants. These were gathered together and set to music by 19th Century French composer, Theodore Dubois, who used an orchestra, chorus and solo soprano, tenor and baritone voices.

His pieces, traditionally performed together, last a little under an hour which doesn't really work for a 21st century concert.

So *Music at the Basilica* director Frank De Rosso added three related sacred works to lead into the main performance.

These featured the evening's soloists but without the orchestra or chorus.

This meant the concert began with all the dramatic force of Manfred Pohlenz's operatic baritone thunderously delivering Auguste Descarries' *Pie*

Jesu, accompanied by Frank on a small electronic organ with amplifiers set on 'full power'.

This mighty opening was followed – and neatly contrasted – by Soprano soloist Teresa Duddy's beautiful rendition of Dubois' lyrical *Ave Verum*. For this delicate piece, Teresa's warm, rich voice was balanced by Allister Cox's clarinet clarity and a much more subdued organ from Frank.

This was followed by Dubois' *Panis Angelicus* from tenor David Campbell, whose silvery tones were mirrored by Carter Harris Smith's cello, highlighted by Jacinta Dennet's harp and again supported by Frank's sympathetic playing.

A short break allowed the orchestra and chorus to assemble, with the musicians at ground level and soloists seated in front of the tiered chorus.

Thus all were in plain sight of conductor Joseph Hie, who controlled the entire concert from that point. Conductor Hie didn't use dramatic flourishes. His confident, restrained demeanour encouraged rather than demanded excellence from his musicians and singers – and the concert's overall standard reflected this.

Those seven sacred 'Words' were delivered with reverence as well as the emotional tones that their messages dictated.

They began with the introduction *O vos ones*, doubtless written for a boy soprano but delivered with rare style by Teresa Duddy. This piece was to set the tone for what followed, ranging from delicate near-whispers to thunderous crescendoes.

The first 'Word' *Pater dimity* – father, forgive them for they know not what they do – had tenor David, orchestra and chorus working together softly and most

respectfully while the second, *Hodie mecum eras* – verily thou shalt be in paradise with me – was a quieter conversational duet between tenor David and baritone

Manfred. The third Word *Stabat Mater* – see, O woman, behold thy son beloved – was a delicate, finely balanced piece using all three soloists and chorus with

emotional rises and falls. The fourth Word *Deus meus* – God, why have you

forsaken me? – had Manfred's fine baritone in a pensive questioning solo, while the fifth Word *Sitio* – I am athirst! – saw David, Manfred and male members of the

chorus using big, dramatic pleas. The sixth Word, *Pater in manus twas* – father into

this hands I commend my soul – was delivered by tenor David in suitably solemn, restrained tones while the seventh and climactic ‘Word’ *Et claimants Jesu* – captured all the emotional dramas, passions and emotions that had gone before and led them to a triumphal climax.

Taken together, this made for a wonderful evening of sacred music performed by fine Geelong talent in the most suitable of settings.

A reverend delight that even atheists could appreciate.

– *Colin Mockett*