

AN APPRECIATION OF 'A CELEBRATION OF SINGING'

By Simon Berry (Fgh 59)

I hesitated for a day or two before booking my tickets for the 'Celebration of Singing' event in mid-March. To provide some context, I hadn't visited the Uppingham for more than 55 years and I now live a few miles away, north of Inverness in the Highlands. But my mind was soon made up by the temptation to hear whether the School's musical reputation was still as high as 'in my day'. I had sung in *Semele* and the German Requiem as a boy treble. (Or was it trouble?).

Well, I can report back to those who didn't attend that the Celebration was a brilliant idea, carried out brilliantly, on a weekend of brilliant weather. And brilliance was what we heard at the finale of the Jim Peschek memorial concert as Peter Clements showed off the new stand of organ pipes in *Crown Imperial*. They were new to me anyway, as I remember the Old Chapel with just a hole in the wall. There was full-bodied but sensitive singing by the Chapel Choir, especially fine in the *Prayer of King Henry VI*, and some moving tributes to Jim. However, the best thing was to be reminded of his take-no-prisoners style in the congregational practice session for Fauré's *Libera Me*.

I had been particularly moved by the Singing Faculty concert the previous evening. It would be unprofitable to single out individual performances, particularly as there was such a range of vocal colour and style on display. In almost every case I was moved beyond measure at the promise revealed by these youthful performances of French songs. I have tried to explore why in a poem I wrote shortly afterwards, perhaps as a kind of reaction to other young lives being blighted and snuffed out by the kind of war we never expected to see on our doorstep.

It was wonderful to be able to meet Catherine Griffiths (who had also read *A Song for St Cecilia* with a singer's articulation) the following evening and hear more about the Singing Faculty. This was after a heart-warming tête à tête with mezzo soprano Dame Ann Murray on the Saturday night. Iain Burnside displayed the deft touch of an accompanist in prompting her to tell story after story about humble Irish beginnings and subsequent starry career on the world's most famous opera stages. It was a wonderful evening, showing that not every *prima donna* is a primadonna. The masterclass the following morning must surely have provided something for every student involved.

I'm afraid we weren't able to stay for the full Concert Choir performance of the Faure Requiem. I'm sure it will be reviewed with more insight elsewhere than I could muster. One treat I promised myself on this visit was to take a look at the Old Music School, where I went for weekly music appreciation classes for my first three years at Uppingham. Although not open the exterior looked reassuringly familiar and served as a reminder of those relaxed introductions to a wide range of orchestral music that has stayed with me throughout my life. Thank you, Mr Bean and other members of the music staff from the early 60s.

AT THE SINGING FACULTY CONCERT

Returning to the school many years after
and to such voices with so much to live for
there's this unexpected tear prickling
the corner of my eye
I hear you hit a true note bright as a handbell
so young and yet so confident it can be done –
How have you earned this ability to curl the heart
ask the not so blessed

Later in conversation with the head of faculty
it seems this concert is not solely for the gifted
but to reveal the performance gene
that we all wished we had

In this off-key time my life reaches its final pages –
The gift (in early form) is clearly present here
so why the fear for those with years uncountable?
Listen to this evidence of promise –
It is what our world needs
and requires us always to value
or see it die again in infancy

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