***War & Peace***
**The Choirs of Jesus College Cambridge**
**Directed by Mark Williams**
**Robert Dixon and Benjamin Morris (organ); Rebecca Crawshaw (trumpet)**
**Signum Classics, 2013: SIGCD 328**

The Jesus singers give a glowing account in this rewarding programme. Supple, sensitive direction by Mark Williams. ****

*BBC Music Magazine*

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2014 will mark 100 years since the beginning of the first world war, and first into the centenary field is this fine choral compilation that manages to evoke a sombre mood of commemoration while avoiding sentimentality. Not all the music is specifically related to the war: starting from Parry's neglected evocation of Tennyson's Crossing the Bar, it encompasses classics by Brahms, Ireland and William Harris's fine Faire is the Heaven, effective recent works by Mark Blatchly, Matthew Martin, James MacMillan and Geraint Lewis, and a Kontakion of the Dead from Kiev, before concluding with Vaughan Williams's moving Lord, thou hast been our refuge.

*Nicholas Kenyon, The Observer*

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The sturdy durability of Parry, Ireland, Pärt's *Beatitudes* and Brahms's early *Geistliches Lied* tends to overshadow the more delicately woven atmosphere created by pieces by our contemporaries – MacMillan's *Child's Prayer*, Matthew Martin's *Justorum Animae*, Geraint Lewis's *The souls of the righteous*, and Mark Blatchly's *September 1914: For the Fallen*, an effective setting of the Binyon poem with a trumpet playing the last post at its close. The fine performances make an interestingly broad anthology, culminating in Vaughan Williams's *Lord, thou hast been our refuge,* with a good solo quartet. ***

*Patric Standford, Choir & Organ*

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This new disc from the choir of Jesus College, Cambridge is entitled War and Peace: Music for Remembrance, with a selection of 19th and 20th century music, predominantly but not exclusively British, which reflects the theme of the fallen. Starting with Parry, there is music by Charles Wood, James MacMillan, John Ireland, Mark Blatchly, George Thalben-Ball, Matthew Martin, Geraint Lewis, William H Harris, Douglas Guest and RVW, plus Arvo Part, Johannes Brahms and Kirill Stetsenko.

What is interesting about the performers is that though billed as the choir of Jesus College, Cambridge directed by Mark Williams, we get two choirs for the price of one. There is the chapel choir, which is all male with trebles on the top line, and the college choir which is mixed, but the adult males are common to both choirs. On this disc both choirs perform and sometimes we get the combined choirs. They are joined by organists Robert Dixon and Benjamin Morris and trumpeter Rebecca Crawshaw.

Combining boys and women in the same choir is perhaps not obvious, but the boy trebles of Jesus College choir make a fine soft-grained sound (definitely not continental) whilst the young women in the sopranos have a nice light, clear bright sound. The result, in the opening item Parry's Crossing the Bar sung by the combined choirs, is a lovely light, bright clear sound; youthful with a lovely transparency. We get to hear the warmly attractive sound of the mixed voice College Choir in the next item, Charles Wood's Nunc Dimittis. Wood was a pupil of Parry's and became an important teacher (his pupils including RVW). Though he made several English setting of the Nunc Dimittis this version is for unaccompanied choir setting the Latin words and was commissioned for Westminster Cathedral Choir in 1916. It is a lovely richly textured piece, and the choir give a lovely vibrant but steady performance with nice interaction between the upper and lower voices.

The College choir are joined by Benjamin Morris on the organ for Arvo Part's Beatitudes. Dating from 1990 it is one of Part's few works setting an English text. It was premiered in Berlin by Theatre of Voices directed by Paul Hillier. When listening to the piece I have never been certain whether the uneven stresses in the English are the result of Part's faulty English prosody or simply the result of his tinntinabuli technique. St. John's choir gives a lovely calm performance. There is a sense that the piece pushes the choir to the limit, but the results are finely controlled.

James MacMillan's A Child's Prayer was written in the aftermath of the Dunblane tragedy and the words are a traditional text that MacMillan remembered from his childhood. It is set for two treble soloists and chorus, with here solo trebles Alasdair Austin and Samuel Fitzgerald being joined by the combined choirs. It is rather an austere piece, with the plangent solos being set of by the darker harmonic colours of the choir.

We hear the Chapel choir on its own with organist Robert Dixon in John Ireland's Greater love hath no man written in 1912 for the choristers of St Paul's Cathedral. The choir give the piece a vibrant power with some impressive but controlled powerful climaxes, yet there is subtlety too and the result is strikingly austere at times. Though Ireland described it as a motet for Passiontide and other seasons it is understandable why it has come to be sung in services of Remembrance. There are fine solos from treble Dominic Hill and baritone Michael Moldian.

Parry's There is an old belief is the fourth of his Songs of Farewell which he wrote between 1913 and 1915. The College choir bring a nice shape to the work, with a firm, bright sound. Mark Blatchly's setting of Laurence Binyon's For the Fallen was written in 1980 for the British Legion's Festival of Remembrance. Blatchly sets the whole of Binyon's poem for voices, organ and trumpet, here the trebles accompanied by Robert Dixon and with Rebecca Crawshaw on trumpet. Frankly I find the sentiments of Binyon's poem, when taken complete, rather difficult and it is only when given to boys' voices that it could possibly work. At the words 'At the going down of the sun', the trumpet plays 'The Last Post'.

Brahms's Geistliches Lied is one of his earliest surviving choral works dating from the late 1850's, a period when Brahms was experimenting with counterpoint. The College choir are joined by organist Benjamin Morris in a well-shaped performance, with a lovely transparency of sound though the words are not as clear as they might be.

George Thalben-Ball's Elegy started out life as a spontaneous improvisation to fill a live broadcast during the war. Here is receives a quietly contemplative performance from Robert Dixon.

Ukrainian composer Kirill Stetsenko was both an Orthodox priest and composer, as well as being the head of the music section of the Ministry of Education for the short-lived Ukranian People's Republic.Blahoslovy dushe moya hospoda (Bless the Lord O my Soul) is a quietly prayerful piece which starts of mainly unison, but develops harmonically and rises to a powerful climax before dying away again. Here receiving a finely crafted performance from the College choir.

Matthew Martin's Justorum Animae was written in 2003 and sets the Latin proper for the Feast of All Saints for lower voices (alto, tenor, bass). It is well wrought piece, full of rich harmony and receives a fine performance from the College choir. Geraint Lewis's The Souls of the Righteous was composed as a memorial for William Matthias. There is an impressive organ introduction (played by Benjamin Morris) before the Combined choirs make a lovely hushed entry. The choral writing is slow and homophonic, the piece stately and impressive with some great organ interruptions to the choral writing, and a wonderfully rapt conclusion.

William Harris's Faire is the Heaven is a wonderfully rich setting for double choir of Edmund Spenser, a setting beloved of many choristers. The College choir bring to the opening a clarity and lightness of texture. Smooth and steady at first, the performance develops a wonderful vitality in the middle section and they mange Harris's enharmonic changes with aplomb.

Douglas Guest was Organist and Master of the Choristers at Westminster Abbey. His setting of lines from Laurence Binyon's poem For the Fallen was written for Remembrance Day in 1971. It is a short, well wrought and effective. Here nicely sung by the Chapel choir.

The Combined choirs then sing the Kontakion for the Dead, a traditional Kievan melody which forms part of the Russian Orthodox Burial Service. They make a lovely firm sound, creating a very affecting performance.

Finally the College choir is joined by Robert Dixon on Organ, Rebecca Crawshaw on trumpet with solos from Harriet Flower, Sophie Hytner, Edward Leach and Max Cockerill for RVW's Lord, thou has been our refuge. The piece sets Isaac Watt's paraphrase of Psalm 90 with the familiar metrical version from the hymn O God our help in ages past, using the traditional tune St Anne written by William Croft in 1708. The result it both ingenious and wonderfully affecting, with RVW crafting a finely flexible unison setting as counterpoint to the hymn. In the middle section RVW leaves the hymn behind to create a rather more fully developed texture before the hymn returns on organ and trumpet. A finely sung and rather moving conclusion to a fine disc.

The CD booklet includes full texts and translations, as well as an article about the music.

I am aware that I have rather missed the timing of this disc, but though it was clearly aimed at Remembrance Sunday the strength of the programme and performances is such that I would certainly be happy to listen to the disc at any time of the year.

*Robert Hugill, 'Planet Hugill – A World of Classical Music'*

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This is the sort of programme we'll be experiencing quite a lot in the next four years, I suspect, as music helps us to commemorate World War I. The musicians of Jesus College, Cambridge have got in early with this interesting and discriminating selection.

Though the singers are billed as the Choir of Jesus College there are in fact two choirs here. Perhaps uniquely among Oxbridge colleges the college maintains two choirs: the Chapel Choir is a traditional all-male choir, including boy trebles; and since 1982 there has also been an undergraduate choir, the College Choir, which has female sopranos and some female altos with the adult male singers from the Chapel Choir joining this ensemble as well. The two groups share the responsibility of singing the services in the college chapel each week and sometimes they sing as a Combined Choir. On this disc each choir sings a number of pieces and they come together for four items. It's a sizeable body of singers, consisting of 17 trebles, 9 sopranos, 8 altos/countertenors, 4 tenors and 6 basses. I wondered if the Combined Choir might sound a bit top-heavy but such is not the case.

There's a good deal of fine music on the programme. Parry's magnificent There is an old belief, one of his glorious Songs of Farewell, is one piece that merits that description. It's sung here by the College Choir and they make an excellent job of it. They sing with fervour though I did wonder if they were not just a fraction too closely recorded: both of these comments are issues to which I'll return later. To Sir William Harris belongs the distinction of having written two of the finest anthems in the English church repertoire. One - my favourite by a short head - is Bring us, O Lord God; the other, included here, isFaire is the heaven. The College Choir performs this also and Harris's masterly writing for double choir and his luxuriant textures are realised extremely well in a very fine performance; I like the way that the various lines are sung with clarity yet everything is well blended. And among fine works one has to number also Ireland's Greater love hath no man. This time it's the turn of the Chapel Choir to shine and they do so in an excellent, committed performance.

Not all the music is as well-known as those pieces already mentioned. Mark Blatchly wrote September 1914: For the Fallen for the Royal British Legion's annual Festival of Remembrance in 1980. It's scored for trebles, singing either in unison or in two parts, and organ. He sets Laurence Binyon's poem which includes the famous lines beginning 'They shall grow not old'. In my opinion no one has set this poem better than Elgar in his masterly but neglected The Spirit of England but Blatchly's is a fine, affecting setting which has more than a whiff of Elgarian nobility to it. It features a memorable tune which flowers fully in the stanza that begins with 'They shall grow not old'; the second time it's heard a trumpeter, here Jesus College alumna, Rebecca Crawshaw, plays the Last Post. The Jesus College choristers sing this piece very well indeed.

I was glad to encounter Matthew Martin's Justorum animae. It's set for male voices (ATB) and it's a deeply-felt piece, which the Combined Choirs sing eloquently. In his anthem The souls of the righteous, written in memory of William Mathias, Geraint Lewis sets the same words as Martin but in English. This is also sung by the Combined Choirs, this time with the sopranos and trebles added to the mix. Lewis's music makes its effect cumulatively and through fairly simple means but it's an effective piece and it benefits here from expressive, full-toned singing.

I said earlier that there were two issues to which I'd return. One is the fervour of the singing. I mentioned this in the context of Parry's There is an old belief but this quality is evident right from the start of the programme. I don't think I've heard the Jesus College Choir before but I was impressed. Their tone is full and pleasing, pitching is accurate and they're a pleasure to listen to. However, what impressed me more than anything is the sense of engagement, the commitment with which they sing the music. This is never overdone but all the time you feel as if the music - and the words - matter to them. I found their performances thoroughly convincing.

In many ways they are recorded very well. However, once or twice I wondered if the choir did not sound too close. I felt this to be the case in the aforementioned Parry piece. Another piece that could have benefited if the singers had been a little further away from the microphone is James MacMillan'sA Child's Prayer. Here the choir just sounds too 'present' - and especially the two very good treble soloists. By comparison, Westminster Cathedral Choir, admittedly recorded in a significantly bigger building, are heard from a greater distance and there's more atmosphere - magic, even - in their performance (Hyperion CDA67219). I suspect the placing of the microphones was dictated by the physical space available in the college chapel. While the issue is not a huge one a slightly greater distance between choir and microphones might have added atmosphere without sacrificing clarity.

The college's two Organ Scholars accompany several pieces and the Senior Organ Scholar, Robert Dixon, gets a solo in the shape of Thalben-Ball's famous Elegy, which he does very well. By a pleasing coincidence both served as Organ Scholar at Gloucester Cathedral - probably in succession to one another - before going up to Cambridge. Mark Williams, who has been Director of Music at the college since 2009, has clearly trained his singers very well indeed and he conducts the programme very well.

The well-presented booklet includes all the texts and very useful notes by Malcolm MacDonald.

*John Quinn, Musicweb International*

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