

The Armed Man – A Mass for Peace - Review

An audience of over 300 people attended the performance of this remarkable work by the **Brisbane Concert Choir at St Andrew's** with the **Sinfonia of St Andrews** on Friday afternoon 25th April. Conducted by Dr Debra Shearer-Dirié, it was a fitting tribute to the memory of ANZAC Day.

An overview of the Mass appears on Page 9 in this issue. I made the following notes during the performance, but these are subjective in nature and from a choir singer's viewpoint, and do not pretend to carry the weight of a musicologist's appraisal.

The performance was finely balanced throughout – there was good balance between the male and female voices in the choir, and between the orchestra and the choir. Despite its small size and limited number of strings, the orchestra maintained a fine balance throughout. Especially noteworthy were the lovely cello solo in the *Benedictus*, some very accurate work on percussion, and a warm and controlled sound from the trumpet and especially the trombone in the *Angry Flames* segment.

The Choir performed admirably throughout, with particular attention to clear diction. The singing of the Palestrina style polyphonic passage in the *Kyrie* would have done justice to the Choir of Kings College Cambridge.

Especially notable was the high tessitura soprano part in the *Sanctus*. Sustained and repeated G, A-flat and A-natural passages sounded unstrained and sweetly rounded.

In the *Charge* segment, the choir joined with the orchestra in producing and incredibly dramatic effect, with charging horses, guns firing, and growing excitement as the “Charge!” rang out fortissimo on a rising scale, falling over into a *mêlée* of the sounds of battle and the screams of the injured and dying.

A poignant silence was followed a trumpet solo against the sinister deep tone of a contrabassoon. The four soloists offered a rather subdued introduction to *Angry Flames* – more a lament than a strident enactment of the Hiroshima-based poem.

Torches, a brutal recital of the worst horrors of war, was sung mezzo piano, but leapt up in protest with a final “*Torches*” exclamation, sung fortissimo. The *Agnes Dei* that followed provided a wonderful, contrasting serenity. It offered resignation, leading on to reconciliation.

The plaintive soprano solo, *Now the Guns have Stopped* expressed well the grief implicit in the passage. The *Benedictus*, with the lovely cello solo mentioned above, played over muted strings, continued the reflective mood. The choir entry was gentle, chastened, but building up to a big climax, a hymn of hope and praise to God.

The Mallory text, *Better is Peace*, sung in plainsong, with its repeating “Ring out! Ring out!” calls, seemed to me to depict the human spirit rising again from the terrors of war. And the final words of hope are found in the elegiac hymn of hope and thanks to God that concludes this extraordinary work