



Hamer Singers: The Falling of the Leaves



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Walking to St Peter's Eastern Hill on a cold and windy Sunday afternoon for The Falling of the Leaves, the Hamer Singers' latest concert, it was not difficult to connect with the program title. The church was comfortably warm, with a near capacity audience, and Artistic Director Jonathan Grieves-Smith's warm welcome also introduced the Hamer Singers' new connection with the Anglicare Victoria's Lazarus Centre Program, which provides nourishment, company and comfort to Melbourne CBD's homeless. Grieves-Smith asked that applause be kept until the end of the program, as there was music in the silences between pieces.

This sixty-minute concert of *a cappella* works was cleverly programmed around *Missa Rigensis* by Latvian composer Ugis Praulins (b.1957). Composed for the Riga Dom Boys' Choir, it was first performed in 2002. Praulins intended the work to be contemporary harmonically and rhythmically, but to be appreciated through the prism of the great Renaissance Masses. The five sections would be heard at different points throughout a service if sung liturgically. In this concert performance, the Mass movements were interspersed with complementary works, some from the Renaissance and others contemporary.

Slovenian-born Jacob Handl's (1550-1591) motet "Ecce quomodo moritur justus", a setting from Holy Saturday Responsories, is a solemn hymn-like setting, which demonstrated the Hamer Singers' well-disciplined unanimity of chordal movement and balanced vocal parts. Palestrina's (1525-1594) motet *Sicut cervus* is full of polyphonic contrasts, and Grieves-Smith's direction shaped the phrases in a very fluid and flexible manner. Eric Whitacre (b.1970) composed *Sleep* as a setting of a Robert Frost poem, but after completing the music and then being unable to secure the rights to the poem, Charles Silvestri wrote a new text for the already composed music. The two elements work together very well, and the performance of this eight-part work was very effective. *O vos omnes* by Tomás Luis de Victoria (c 1548-1611) was taken at a very slow pace. With rich intensity in the tonal qualities demonstrating the heaviness of the *Lamentations* text, the very slow tempo did however reveal some less well-tuned chords, with the inner voices not always unanimous.

These works appeared between the movements of the program's centrepiece, *Missa Regensis*. The variety of meanings in the text immediately creates opportunities for the composer to create variety in choral texture and rhythm. Up to eight choral parts at times, and occasionally using solo voices accompanied by the rest of the choir, the work contains much for the listener to appreciate, particularly when these characteristics are so musically shaped by the conductor.

A massive wall of sound produced by the Hamer Singers began the concert and the *Kyrie* of the Mass, with some beautifully phrased and contrasting contributions from various sections of the choir. The highly articulated rhythmic patterns of the *Gloria*, with much interplay in the vocal parts, some solo voices, and chorally contrasting chordal sections again shaped with great attention to detail was also pleasing. Contrary motion and contrary articulation between upper and lower voices effectively opened the *Credo*. This longest text of the mass creates much opportunity for variety in music, and includes short solo passages. A very effective *Crucifixus*, with tricky rhythmic patterns and intervals for the choristers, was managed mostly very accurately. Spoken and whispered sections generated excitement, and the contrast between the exuberance of *Et vitam venturi* and the whispered *Amen* was well-measured. Unusual chord progressions in the *Sanctus and Benedictus* were negotiated successfully, and the *Agnus Dei* opened with an effective solo from a young tenor and was brought to a most satisfying close with a spoken prayer over sustained choral chords before the final choral Amen.

A highlight of the afternoon for me was the closing piece, receiving its Australian premiere. *Salutation* by Latvian composer Eriks Esenvalds (b.1977), to a section of Nobel Literature Prize-winning text of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was commissioned by the National Youth Choir of Great Britain, and first performed in 2017. For this, the Singers put aside their folders of music, and heads held high they sang from memory. It was incredibly powerful from the audience perspective, and quite liberating for their voices too.

The audience honoured the request for silence between the pieces, which indeed did contribute to the overall effectiveness of the program, so the opportunity to applaud at the end was treated with an explosive expression of appreciation! Grieves-Smith continues to create interesting and effective programs, and conducts very musically, shaping phrases effectively, and attending to musical detail while still allowing the music to live and grow.

Margaret Arnold reviewed this program Sunday 29 July 2018.

**Note from Margaret Arnold: My husband is a freelance bass, and was called in at the last minute as a substitute for this concert.*