



## Hamer Singers: Remembrance

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Bathed in the warm glow of sunshine through the golden windows of St Patrick's Cathedral, a good-sized crowd gathered to experience the Hamer Singers' fourth concert since their establishment in December 2017.

Each concert has provided an interesting selection of choral works from the Renaissance to the present day, and the three programs this year have been curated around a central theme. Remembrance, sparked by World War One and embracing music inspired as a reaction to loss and grief, provided the framework for twelve varied choral works. Artistic director and conductor Jonathan Grieves-Smith introduced the program, and reminded the audience that there is "music in the silence", so applause was held until the end of the hour-long program.

Opening with Orlando Gibbons' simple and beautiful *Drop, drop slow tears*, the quality of the choral sound was immediately established, with excellent tuning of chords, and balance of voices. The same Phineas Fletcher text was set by William Walton, with a haunting falling soprano line illustrating the tears, over chromatic harmony, again maintaining balance, control and excellent intonation.

These attributes were maintained throughout a challenging program, which included three Australian premieres. *Odi et Amo* (I hate and I love) by Icelandic composer and Golden Globe Award winner Jóhann Jóhannsson, who died earlier this year, used a short text by Catullus (84-54BC) and in music of hypnotic simplicity, the text was chanted in Russian, Icelandic, Portuguese, Romanian, Korean, Turkish and Hindi. The sparse and repetitive musical ideas were brought to life with some superbly controlled singing. Likewise, in another premiere, vocal control in the much richer texture of David Bednall's 1914 IV: *The Dead*, the text of Rupert Brooke articulated with clarity and beautifully shaped musical phrases in rich chords and mostly rhythmic unison. A short *Nunc Dimittis*, composed by Englishman Gerard McBurney for his mother's funeral, was also a first Australian performance, and this more personal work was perhaps less effective as a concert piece, though in the context of the program of a range of responses to death, it certainly belonged.

John Taverner's *Funeral Ikos* is repetitive in a mantra-like way, with a series of syllabically-set verses (Greek Orthodox funeral sentences) each ending with a chorus of *Alleluia*, while James MacMillan's *Data est mihi omnes potestas* provided a huge choral contrast, with a powerful opening, and very different choruses of *Alleluia*, with melismas cascading from on high first in the soprano voices, and then with the male voices tossing the florid sequence down to the depths.

Three works, written to commemorate tragic deaths made further demands on the choir. Mauersberger's *Wie liegt die Stadt so wüst*, was written five weeks after the bombing of Dresden, in which eleven boys from his renowned Dresden Kreuzchor were among the 25,000 casualties. Using selected verses from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the composition moves slowly, the text at the forefront, the pain and loss demonstrated in chromatic chords, and contrasting dynamics. The basses of the Hamer Choir shone here, underpinning the chords with great security. James Mac Millan's *A Child's Prayer* was a response to the killing of 16 children and a teacher in a horrifying school shooting in Dunblane, Scotland in 1996. This small motet, dedicated to those who died was full of joy and love, even when faced with violence and pain. The two soprano soloists, Iris Ferwerda and Camilla Gorman, soared with pinpoint accuracy above the chorus with the most beautifully appropriate ethereal treble quality. Arvo Pärt's *Da Pacem Domine* written two days after the 2004 Madrid train bombings is a meditative call for peace, and encourages the listeners to become immersed in the sound as the pitches slowly change around them. The Hamer Singers' control of tone colour and great tuning of chords allowed the Cathedral space to provide that bath of sound.

The final piece on this demanding program was Clytus Gottwald's arrangement for 16 voices of Gustav Mahler's *Ich bin der welt adhanden gekommen*, originally an orchestral song. There were moments of exquisite beauty here. The whole orchestral range was covered, from the soaring high sopranos to a rich alto sound and down to the low basses. The Hamer Singers have always had a strong soprano line-up, with fewer voices in the lower parts. In this concert the balance was excellent, with the bass line more present, and providing a solid foundation.

Throughout the concert Jonathan Grieves-Smith, conducting with what looked to be a pencil, played his choir as if it were a glorious instrument. The well-prepared choir responded with great control, stamina and concentration, providing all the required colours, and excellent intonation. The very attentive and quiet audience was pleased to applaud vigorously once the last chord had faded away.