

LIMELIGHT

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When We Were Children (Hamer Singers)

A shared vision results in a superb sheen and finish to the Hamer Singers' sound.

by *Christopher Willcock* on April 16, 2018



St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne **April 15, 2018**

Apart from the obvious dissimilarities, there are nevertheless parallels between the formation of a new string quartet and assembling a new choir. When musicians come together to make music there needs to be some measure of agreement about how this is to be done. The artistic director of the newly-formed Hamer Singers, Jonathan Grieves-Smith, has already established a number of elements in this contract. In this second concert presented by the Hamer Singers the venue, St Patrick's Cathedral, offered a highly favourable ambiance for the works chosen on the program. In his helpful introduction to the concert, the conductor described the path taken to gather and then to order the works into a coherent sequence. Most are from the 20th and 21st centuries and the interiority of their texts is such that a kind of conversation between them is established. This proved to be the case in performance.

Generally, the dynamic level of the voices did not go beyond moderately loud, and often it was quite soft. Achieving beauty of sound at these levels through precise chording, clear phrasing, and due awareness given to the sounds produced by parts other than your own, was strikingly evident in the Singers' work. Grieves-Smith was able to bring the nearly 50 singers to an agreement on these matters: their intonation, and hence their chording, was exemplary, the line drawn by the voices – whether as unaccompanied melodies, or as dense polyphony – was well described: shape and pulse were both clearly established, and the balance that comes from a chorister listening to what singers in the other parts are doing, and recognising one's role as a singer in the larger enterprise, was strongly evident. Clearly, the work of reaching an agreement about how music might be presented by this body of singers is well advanced.

Four of the five works presented were for unaccompanied voices and demonstrated a variety of vocal techniques. Arvo Pärt's *I am the true vine*, with its highly organised pattern of pitches and repetitions also uses the medieval technique of hocketing, where the text, taken from the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, is broken up between the upper voices so that as it unfolds the listener's ear moves from following one vocal part to another. A virtue of this technique is that the melodic material, even though it remains similar throughout, retains its freshness by being divided between the voices in ways that serve the demands of the text. This the Singers realized most ably.

Anna Thorvaldsdóttir's Icelandic setting *Heyr þú oss himnum á* impressed by its sequence of slow-moving chords, never reaching beyond its controlled dynamic of almost conversational directness, but expressive of the gentle pulse of the Icelandic psalm. The Singers sounded quite persuasive in delivering the language of the original.

The piling up of various English versions of a verse from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (13:11) is the textual basis for David Lang's 2013 commission *When we were children*. This setting proceeded by increments from a unison beginning in the upper voices, through a building-up of successive voices underpinning the melodic material of the opening. A nearly obsessive three-note recurring motto also characterises the progress of this lengthy litany. The progress takes a sharp turn with a key change just beyond the halfway point, and the litany continues in this new direction. The Singers kept this relentless journey moving and interesting, not by pushing any part or any version of the scriptural text beyond its plain meaning, but by ensuring that the work's structure was thoughtfully managed. The suddenness of the ending left one with the impression that the litany continues well into the silence that followed.

In jumping back nearly four and a half centuries to the England of Queen Mary's time and the music of the Chapel Royal of the period, the concert offered an example of the full flowering of Renaissance polyphonic a cappella writing. The presentation by the Hamer Singers of Thomas Tallis' *Agnus Dei* from his *Missa Puer natus est nobis*, a richly satisfying setting of this liturgical text, was completely winning. Here in the third iteration of the *Agnus* text, the dynamic level of the voices edged towards a stronger, fuller sound. The choir's movement towards this level was very skilfully judged.

The closing work of the concert, Pēteris Vasks' *Laudate Dominum* is a substantial piece in which longish paragraphs on the organ, played with fine judgement by Christopher Cook, alternate with sections for unaccompanied choir. This pattern persists for three such exchanges. In the fourth exchange the organ leads to the final section where it is joined by the choir. The key has moved from the minor to the major, and a new word, Alleluia, replaces the *Laudate Dominum* of the previous sections. Things grow quite hugely from this point: both the tempo and the dynamics increase. The D major ending is a resonant climax where both organ and choir are called to give their utmost. This was a most powerful and life-affirming conclusion to a program that was marked by a superb sheen and finish to the sound issuing from the shared vision of conductor and choir. One looks forward eagerly to the Hamer Singers' next concert. The contract to bring carefully prepared performances to its audience has been signed, and has already delivered.



Hamer Singers: when we were children



Article details

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Composer Anna Thorvaldsdóttir

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By half past three on an overcast Sunday afternoon (April 15, 2018), over 200 people filled the central section of the surprisingly light-filled St Patrick's Cathedral. Although the concert was advertised as a one hour program, the wise patrons had brought their own cushions, and were well prepared for the penitential seating. The black-clad choir of 45 filed in and formed four rows on the steps, and Artistic Director (and conductor) Jonathan Grieves-Smith took to the microphone to introduce the music.

He gave his reasons for the selection: the pieces spoke to each other across years and borders, their texts were poetic, and often the silences mattered as much as text and pitch. He requested that applause be held until the end of the program. And so began a blissful hour of sublime music, in a fine acoustic and contemplative atmosphere, highlighting Goethe's famous words quoted in the program note "Music is liquid architecture, architecture is frozen music."

Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's (born 1935) music is much loved by choral singers. His skill in making sense of religious text in his music is quite extraordinary. *I Am the True Vine* (1996) is a setting of the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 1-14. The metaphor of the vine with its patterns of branches and leaves is reflected in the patterns of pitches which remain constant while the rhythm changes to accommodate the text. Unwavering pitch and unanimous vowel sounds from the excellent sopranos made for very effective unisons, and diverging lines, which were added and subtracted, effectively illustrated the vine and its branches.

Anna Thorvaldsdóttir (born 1977) is from Iceland, a country with an astonishing richness of choral singing. Although better known for her orchestral music, this emerging composer also has high profile choirs eager to sing her works. *Heyr þú oss himnum á* (2005), a setting of an ancient Icelandic psalm by Olafur à Söndum (1560-1627) is simple, prayerful and hymn-like. With a beautiful vocal tone beginning the piece, the women joined quickly in a rich choral texture. Sung in Icelandic by the Hamer Singers, the different vowel sounds were immediately obvious in the colour of the slow moving and sustained text. The richer bass sound was very welcome in underpinning the harmony the upper voices often sustaining 2nds, 4ths or minor 6ths before resolving onto open 5ths.

New-York based David Lang (born 1957) is one of America's most performed composers, well known for his Pulitzer Prize-winning "oratorio" *The Little Match Girl Passion. when we were children* (2013) was commissioned as a companion piece for the *Match Girl*. The text is from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 11: "When I was a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child". Working at first from the King James version of the text, Lang then compiled all the different translations into English he could find, cut them, ordered them alphabetically, and used these as musical phrases, punctuated by equally important silences. The Hamer Singers produced excellent diction again, and the generous acoustic allowed even the silences to speak. With the lower voices in 4ths and 5ths, the sopranos articulated the main text, again vowels matching to create excellent intonation. A flawless counter melody emerged with young soprano voices contributing to the naivety of the piece.

In sharp contrast was the *Missa Puer Natus Est Nobis: Agnus Dei* by Thomas Tallis (1505-1585). The seven intricate vocal lines combine (in this 1977 performing edition) to create long polyphonic lines, shaped within the vocal part, but always overlapping so that there are extended periods of continuous musical sound.

The final piece by Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks (born 1946) *Laudate Dominum* (2015) used only those words until the final moments, but it also used the organ, played here effectively by Christopher Cook. The organ prelude was followed by a reverential unaccompanied chorus, with sustained note values. It was a joy to hear the Hamer Singers' soft singing staying perfectly in tune throughout the long unaccompanied sections. Two more organ interludes answered by pianissimo choir, grew in intensity. The fourth organ statement is also increased in grandeur, and was finally answered by a huge major "Alleluia", and now the singing was finally with the organ. The final chord was long and sustained.

The appreciative audience's ovation was long and sustained too. The uncomfortable seat was well and truly forgotten in a concert that was as promised an hour in length. The very polished chorus took a very polished, unanimous and well-deserved bow.

The Hamer Singers clearly respond well to Jonathan Grieves-Smith's musical leadership. His repertoire choices are giving Melbourne audiences something fresh, and the choir is singing very well indeed in only their second concert. I would still like to hear a little more volume from the tenors and basses, who are outnumbered by the women, but the sound they make is good. Looking ahead to their future concerts, with more new Latvian and Swedish works as well as some contemporary favourites, our musical diet is being well-served.

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BY JOHN GLOVER

When We Were Children Hamer Singers

St. Patrick's Cathedral, April 15

Musical architecture

An organist at his peak

Vocal expertise like you've never heard before

What's the first adjective that pops into your head when you hear the term 'sacred music'? If you're like me, you would have said 'ancient' in a heartbeat.

Though sacred music seems a timeless genre in the classical world, the style has not always been trendy with modern-day listeners. It can sometimes be confined to its use in religious tradition, and its musical genius can go under-appreciated – often, for very long periods.

It was through the Hamer Singers' first performance of 2018 (and their second ever concert!) that this dilemma was resolved. This first started as I was reading the program and found a quote from the famous writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "Music is liquid architecture, architecture is frozen music".

Goethe certainly pulled out all the stops when he wrote this neat line. In all seriousness, though, it is so profound to think of music in a tangible form like this, compared to an aural sensation alone. When we hear music and its subtleties, we are structuring sounds in our minds to create a kind of three-dimensional form that comes to life and touches our spirits in ways we cannot understand.

In this light, sacred music is a form of architecture that touches spiritual and non-spiritual people alike. As such, I was very excited to hear this program full of sacred works by modern-day composers within the majestic space of St Patrick's Cathedral.

After an insightful introduction from artistic director Jonathan Grieves-Smith, the concert commenced with Arvo Pärt's *I Am the True Vine*. Set to the words of Jesus from the Gospel of John, the structure of this composition demands great musical precision and blend of voices to convey its veneration for God.

The Hamer Singers exceeded these with their artistic ingenuity across all ranges in an awe-inspiring performance of this work. Just in the way that the music constructs sounds to resemble branches and leaves, the voices of the Hamer Singers were so organic and natural, curling around each other and spanning through the acoustics of the cathedral.

The second work of the program featured a charming Icelandic vocal work, *Heyr þú oss himnum á*, by composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir. First off, absolute kudos goes to the choir for their pronunciation – the work is written entirely in Icelandic, and although I'm not a native speaker, it sounded very convincing. More than that, the feature that struck me in the performance of this work was its gravitas to the human spirit. The song yearns to the complete devotion and almightiness of its God, and the rich earthy timbral quality of the choir was complementary to this ideal. I felt empowered by this work, despite the language barriers.

David Lang's piece *When We Were Children* stood as the central work in the concert, and its performance did not disappoint. The systematic and methodical exactness of the singers was truly stunning, and I was immediately hypnotised by the work. I could visualise each melodic line swirling around as thin as threads, merging and flowing in and out of each other to create weaves, knots, and ties, on a musical canvas. Shout-outs go to the sopranos in particular, with their glacial entries amidst the cacophony of chants and voices below them; truly remarkable!

You would expect another postmodern work to build on the concert's foundations at this point, however it was a surprise to hear fragments of the *Missa Puer Natus Est Nobis* by Tallis up next. And you know what? It fitted in perfectly with the program. The work, with its intricate vocal lines and textures, was so spellbinding along with the earlier concert pieces, that you may not have even realised it was written over 400 years ago. The ingenuity of Grieves-Smith's program curation was so evident – it was as though there were discussions taking place between each of the composers, all connected through the medium of their music. Their resemblance in their styles is uncanny.

These ideas culminated in the final work of the concert, *Laudate Dominum* by Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks. This piece was presented so powerfully by the Hamer Singers in this space, and a special mention goes to organist Christopher Cook whose majestic performance was vital. The vocal control and demands of the singers was been extraordinary through this concert and the ending of Vasks' work demonstrated just that. Just as the same way that last D major chord resonated within the space, so did my views upon sacred music. Grieves-Smith and the Hamer Singers have constructed a monumental cathedral in the aural dimension that will always stand in my mind; a cathedral that even the Heavens may hear.