MUMS Festive Concert

at The Cosmo Rodewald Concert Hall
Reviewed by Matthew Dougall December 2017

For their final concert of 2017, the Manchester University Music Society (MUMS) chose a rather un-festive festive concert programme. I have to be honest, but when a concert advertises itself as 'festive' one immediately thinks of carols, Christmas songs and the like, and not of classical music spreading several centuries including operatic arias. This was a surprise.

However, the evening's programme was an interesting one and also very enjoyable. We started with three Baroque choral works sung by The Cosmo Singers, none of which were familiar to me, but I enjoyed listening to them greatly.

Starting with Samuel Scheidt's 'Puer Natus In Bethlehem' we did start in quasi-festive mood and this was then followed by my favourite of the three, and perhaps also the best sung, 'O Magnum Mysterium' by Giovanni Gabrielli (actually pre-Baroque but only just), with the final piece of the set being Heinrich Schutz's motet, 'Die Himmel Erzaehlen Die Gottes'.

We then skipped a couple of centuries and were brought into the world of the great Italian opera composers of Giacomo Puccini and Guiseppe Verdi. We heard first a very short but delightful aria from Puccini's Madame Butterfly, 'Amore O Grillo', which was followed by a short selection from Verdi's 'La Traviata', which included two soloists and chorus.

The male soloist this evening was the young and very promising lyric tenor **Zahid Siddiqui**. Still only a second year student, his vocal quality and control, along with the maturity and sensitivity of his interpretations were quite astounding. A lovely voice, and he will certainly go far!

After the interval and the first piece to greet us was a tone poem for wind orchestra by 20th century composer Alfred Reed, entitled simply, 'Russian Christmas Music'. Its dark and atmospheric brooding orchestration and repetitive rhythmic structure made for a very dramatic and emotional experience. Huge orchestral swells to fortissimo with much percussion giving way to almost nothing except a plaintive tubular bell. I have never heard this piece nor have I ever heard of this composer before, but I really loved this work, and it was played with skill and passion this evening by the student orchestra.

And finally, we stayed in Russia, but moved to more familiar territory to hear a few selections from Tchaikovsky's opera, 'Eugene Onegin'. Starting with the famous 'Polonaise' we then hear Lenski's aria 'Kuda Kuda' sung once again by the talented Siddiqui, and finally the entr'acte and Waltz utilising The Cosmo Singers once again. A joyous finish to the concert.

Well, not quite - there was another little surprise in the form of a rehearsed encore which entailed all the conductors 'fighting' over who should conduct the orchestra in the final piece, Leroy Anderson's perennial favourite, 'Sleigh Ride', which, in the end, the orchestra played without a conductor at all!

There are a couple of things though which I feel I really do need to mention. The first is about the organisation and presentation of the concert in general. It all felt very ad hoc and disorganised, and the constant shuffling of choir members reconfiguring for every song, then moving of chairs and accoutrements between every piece all took time and looked and felt a little awkward. Surely there must have been a way of having everything in place at the start and working round it. The second mention goes to at least one of this evening's violinists. Unfortunately there was at least one of the violins which was very much out of tune and extremely tinny, and every time the violins played it screamed at me. Again, surely this is something that could very easily have been rectified and I feel sure the violinist/s must themselves have been aware of this.

As is usual with MUMS, different pieces are conducted by different conductors in order to give

their students as much practice as possible. It always amazes me how the same group of musicians respond differently to certain conductors, as well as the infinite number of conducting styles on display, from the strict, unemotional, almost robotic conducting of **Hugh Morris**, to the flamboyant and passionate
Robin Wellington
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Despite the concert not being what I expected, it was nevertheless very enjoyable, listening to some extremely talented young musicians. Enjoy your festive break and I look forward to coming back to your concerts in the new year.