

Wednesday 29 May 2002

Passion in the pipework

Concert

Exmoor Singers

Purcell Room

★★★★☆

“Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation,” the Rev Eli Jenkins declares in *Under Milk Wood*. And hearing Exmoor Singers (they dislike the definite article), you can only shout “Amen”. For every evening of the week, while the rest of us are supine before a soap or spearing a pork chop, men and women tired from work are gathered in choirs in rehearsals, sharing the joys of a good sing.

Or, as with Exmoor Singers and their founder-conductor James Jarvis, a stunningly good sing – and every note unaccompanied. They won the Sainsbury’s Mixed Voice Choir of the Year in 1998; last November they returned from the Sligo International Choral Festival with first prize.

But their CV alone can give no hint of the immaculately blended tone that pours seemingly effortlessly from their mouths. A sustained tone, too: they can purr pianissimo for bar after bar without a hair being turned. This is a choir going places.

They are also adventurous with repertoire. Perhaps you need to be to make a mark. Even so, with so much timid choral music available it takes a special effort to hoist yourself before the public with Maxwell Davies, Penderecki, Elliott Carter, David Sawer and several contemporary British composers known and loved chiefly by their parents.

One of them was 16 years old: Joseph Fort. We heard the premiere of his *Ave Maria*. At the moment he has a naughty knack of demanding risky entries in exposed places without much musical benefit. But his skills may well settle into fluency in time – the seeds are already planted. And even experienced composers look gauche when placed next to Carter’s magnificent setting of Emily Dickinson’s *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*.

This sinewy, comparatively early piece (1945) launched the concert and within seconds the choir’s strengths blazed forth as they bounced lightly, utterly assured, through the intricate rhythmic counterpoint.

A great mainstream composer was lost when Carter grew into a great leader of the advance guard. With Penderecki, the development process has gone in reverse, without greatness reached anywhere: we heard his *Agnus Dei*, heartfelt perhaps, but in musical terms a doodle.

Other selections in a too lengthy programme needed greater fibre. And nerves appeared to take a toll whenever a voice stepped out of the mass into a solo. But flaws on all sides fell away once the fervour of Jonathan Harvey’s *Missa Brevis* kicked in, or when Sawer, in *Sounds*, played clever games with three teasing poems by the artist Kandinsky.

All this and a pianist too: Karl Lutchmayer, who interspersed Edwin Roxburgh’s thorny *Prelude and Toccata* and the bequiling decomposed Debussy of Alastair Stout’s *Pour les notes répétées*.

He’s an impressive player; but this was the evening of the golden throats.

Geoff Brown