



**SACRED SONGS**, Friday 30th September, 7:30 pm.  
**CARITAS CHAMBER CHOIR**, directed by Benedict Preece.  
**CANTICA SACRA**, from Steenwijk, Netherlands, directed by Claartje van Dokkum.  
**St. Peter's Methodist Church, St. Peter's Street, Canterbury.**

This was the very first time the Caritas Choir had performed in collaboration with Cantica Sacra. It was also the first time Ben's worthy outfit had sung in the Methodist Church. And it was just as well I'd watched a rehearsal performance of Cantica Sacra, which had been posted on the Caritas Facebook page earlier that day, or else I would have turned up at the St. Peter's C. of E. Church through sheer force of habit.

The lofty, clean white proportions of the neo-classical Methodist Church contrasted interestingly with the medieval Gothicism of the Anglican Church opposite, where Caritas have performed on a number of occasions before. However, I have experienced many concerts at the Methodist Church, so was confident of favourable acoustics, especially sitting as I was, in the second row near the middle.

At the east end of the church was the raised performance stage, with an impressive apsidal end behind. On either side of the stage, doors led to, I assume, what passed for dressing or waiting rooms. The pre-concert preparations seemed to involve both choirs seemingly walking from one door to the other, like some Brian Rix farce, or the figures on one of those elaborate mechanical clocks one sees in European public buildings.

Both choirs were dressed in black, which made them indistinguishable from one another, as they chatted informally and then finally settled in the front seats to the far left and right, to await the start of the recital. It soon became obvious that our Netherlander visitors easily outnumbered the native choir and I looked forward to hearing how the two choirs interacted with each other.

As Ben sorted out the grand piano, he seemed happy and excited by the impending collaboration. And if he felt nervous, then it certainly didn't show.

By 7:30 pm, there were very few empty seats left in the church. The recital kicked off with Heilig, by Mendelssohn, performed by both choirs together, and conducted by Ben. The power of some 50 voices, from my seating position, was overwhelmingly powerful and very moving.

The joint choir continued with Northern Lights, composed in 2007 by the 38 year-old Norwegian born, Ola Gjeilo. A US resident, Gjeilo wrote this piece in his native Oslo, as the subject seemed to demand. This was very serene music for such a powerful subject. Cantica's director, Claartje, now assumed the conducting role, with Ben on piano.

I had listened to this Lauridsen-like piece on YouTube prior to the concert, but I was in no way prepared for the sheer force at this live performance, in volume, clarity and emotion. And the stereo effect was amazing. For the next three pieces, Cantica Sacra took to the stage alone. They had already performed a lunchtime concert at the cathedral that day, and certainly showed no signs of flagging that I could discern.

They began with Flight Song, by another Norwegian-born composer, the 36 year-old, Kim Andre Arnesene. This impressive piece sounded like Rutter on steroids, and was performed with gusto by Cantica Sacra.

The wooden floor gently rocked, and sometimes not so gently, as Claartje literally danced her way through the performance of Zum Abendsegen, by Mendelssohn. And, as she threw her arms around with ever increasing passion, I began to feel very vulnerable, sitting as I was, right next to the conductor's portable rostrum. A clout round the head seemed imminent at any moment!

Cantica Sacra finished off their solo section with Four Days that Changed the World, by Oxford based British choral composer, the 61 year-old, Bob Chilcott. This was four separate pieces that celebrated four key dates. For 29th March, 1455: The Invention of the Printing Press, the choir was augmented by a few members from Caritas and Ben, once more, accompanying on piano. The choir sang: 'the quick, brown fox jumped over the lazy dog', in rhythmic fashion, and sometimes in the style of a round.

The piece from 1st August, 1834, and The Abolition of Slavery, retained both Ben and the extra Caritas members. This was a powerful emotional anthem, sung very movingly by Cantica Sacra.

Now slimmed down to their usual number of singers, the choir continued with: 28th September 1928, The Discovery of Penicillin, which sounded like a quality show tune. And it was followed by 14th December 1903: The first Powered Flight. This final song was accompanied by many dramatic flourishes on the piano, by Ben, as the choir sang with great enthusiasm and joy. For some reason, memories of early prog-rock albums came to mind during this last piece.

Ben and the Caritas Chamber Choir now took to the stage, with *Meditabor* (or *Meditation*) by Rheinberger. A child prodigy, having become an accomplished organist at the age of seven, the German-born Josef Rheinberger is a personal favourite of Ben's and an underrated composer whose reputation will be greatly enhanced if Ben and the Caritas Choir, with their crisp diction in this piece, have anything to do with it.

Welsh-born composer, the 40-year old, Paul Mealar, is a friend of the Caritas Chamber Choir, and has many favourable things to say about them. Ben and the choir certainly returned the compliment tonight with a stunning performance of Paul's piece: *Peace*. Written for a friend's wedding, *Peace* is a beautiful setting of the well known prayer of St. Francis of Assisi: 'Lord, make me the instrument of thy peace.'

As it turned out, the Caritas performance of this song was infinitely better than any I had heard on YouTube in preparation for this review. And throughout the performance, Ben's conducting style contrasted interestingly with that of Claartje van Dokkum. He is certainly more subtle, but no less genuine in his passion and commitment, as his winklepickers slid gently across the polished wooden timbers of the church's floor. *Ave Maris Stella*, by Grieg came next, and is one of the few choral pieces produced by this well-known composer. In this performance, the high-end voices of the Caritas Choir were beautifully clear, and very moving.

Parry wrote his *My Soul There is a Country*, during the First World War. But this is no celebration of war, but a poignant elegy from a man who was reaching the end of his life, and who'd become very depressed by seeing his music students being sent away to slaughter. Set to words by Henry Vaughan (1621 to 1695), the emotions of this piece were very well interpreted by Caritas.

Appropriately, Caritas concluded their solo spot with *Crossing the Bar*; a setting of the poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The music was composed by their own director, Ben Preece, and this was its second UK performance.

I knew of Ben as a talented horn player and pianist, and had seen him often as a lay clerk in the Canterbury Cathedral choir. In addition, I have enjoyed many performances of the Caritas Chamber Choir, under Ben's directorship, but this was the first time I had heard a composition of his.

I wanted to be able to describe to you how this wonderful piece sounded by making comparisons to other 'modern' composers in the popular field of contemporary choral music, but I just couldn't do it. Ben's is a completely unique voice in this rich genre. The performance demonstrated interesting juxtapositions between the high-end and low-end voices, which made the sound so very much more powerful when the whole choir finally sang together. This is an astonishingly moving composition, and a stunning piece of writing. Is there no end to this man's talent?

After the performance, a member of the choir confided in me the trouble he had in singing this piece, because of the emotion it engendered, which is a wonderful testimony to the power of Ben's setting.

To conclude the evening, both choirs came together again to perform another song by Ola Gjeilo, entitled: *The Ground*, which comes from his *Sunrise Mass*. With Ben on piano, and Claartje conducting, we were once more reminded of the power and clarity of those 50 voices.

I sincerely hope that this won't be the last time these two very talented choirs come together and delight us with their voices.

**PAUL CRAMPTON**