

Kokoro/Forkgen at St Peter's, Bournemouth

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They don't have many nights of heavy-duty contemporary music in Bournemouth. But when they do, my gosh, they really pile it on. This epic concert, given by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's fine new-music group Kokoro and the mellifluous London choir Canticum, contained no fewer than five substantial pieces of new or recent music.

But, perhaps because we were sitting in the glorious Victorian church where Hubert Parry was baptised and Mary Shelley resides in the graveyard, we were also given lush choral works by Elgar and Parry. Indeed, only the severe and apparently unanticipated length of Marc Yeats's *Shadow, and the Moon* saved us from Bax as well.

Listening to Yeats's piece, for six instruments, was like stepping back 90 years to the heyday of serialism. Much of it was like Webern, but without the brevity. I found the dense interplay of motives gripping at first, and the piece was shaped persuasively — violent outbursts interspersed with passages in which the music seemed to dissipate into silence. But half the length would have produced twice the impact.

Still, it was admirably delivered by Kokoro under Mark Forkgen. And they also gave persuasive performances of James MacMillan's jagged and astringent *The Road to Ardtalla* and Stephen McNeff's *Lux* — evoking eight qualities of light (including the absence of it) in a kaleidoscopic whirl of clever instrumentation that passed through passages of quasi-Romantic yearning and a 7/4 stomp before ending in the sepulchral stasis of *lux aeterna*.

However, it was the most traditional of the evening's new pieces that most held my attention. Geoffrey Burgon, who died last year, always felt that his music had been unjustly maligned because it was tonal and crafted along unsensational, old-fashioned lines. Well, perhaps a posthumous re-evaluation is on the way, because his unaccompanied choral cantata, *Songs between the Soul and the Bridegroom*, proved to be a work of quiet intensity and thoughtfulness.

It set love poems by Burgon's favourite poet, the 16th-century mystic St John of the Cross, in a lush, lyrical but never obvious way that infused the words with colour but always allowed them to come across clearly. Canticum could have widened the dynamic range a little — it was all rather mezzo this and that — but to sustain this 25-minute piece with such impeccable intonation and blend was a good effort.

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