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by Christopher Morley

THE ORCHESTRA OF ST JOHN
St John's Church, Bromsgrove

The well-rewarded enterprise of the founders of Bromsgrove's exciting new Orchestra of St John moved to a new level last Saturday for the ensemble's second concert, with the formation of its own choir.

Comprising members of the St John's Choir, the Grafton Consort, the CBSO Chorus (quite a catch) and local Worcestershire societies, the chorus' impressive roster of singers produced a sturdy sound, bringing vibrant excitement to its first-ever public notes; the opening of Mozart's Requiem.

Diction was well-prepared, attack and tone were fearless, and the 'Kyrie' fugue was given with freshness and vigour. Unfortunately this robustness remained almost entirely unleavened throughout the entire work. More contrast would have thrown the music's special blend of drama and reflection into much greater relief, and we really had to wait for the solo quartet's 'Benedictus' (young tenor Gwilym Bowen outstanding here, as he was throughout - his earlier 'Mors stupebit' had raised the neck-hairs) for any hint of solace.

Richard Jenkinson conducted with his customary infectious enthusiasm, but there were some ragged entries, some obtrusive vocal upbeats from him, and some over-long gaps between sections.

The compact orchestra itself did a splendid job, and it was so good to hear the counterpoint of the trombone-trio with such clarity.

Earlier we had been given an Elgar Serenade for Strings of exquisite fragility, with some natural, eloquent 'portamenti' and a stunning reading of Britten's Rimbaud 'Les Illuminations', Jenkinson's expertly-trained players relishing this compendium of Britten's highly personal string orchestra style, and soprano Claire Prewer a brilliant vehicle for the music's often near-cabaret settings, her resourceful timbres many-coloured as she dug deep into the character of these almost surreal poems.