

Transcribed from The Evening Standard
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Bach Choir/Hill
Festival Hall

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Sincerity and conviction are no guarantee of quality in art, but they may help. Richard Blackford's oratorio *Voices of Exile* is a deeply personal response to the experience of exile, not Blackford's own, but that of displaced people around the world (Bengal, Somalia, Bosnia etc), as voiced in poetry, and in Blackford's own field recordings of music from some of those countries.

This is no ragged patchwork, however. Although his use of percussion occasionally hinted at a taste for exotica, Blackford's own musical language is confidently tonal, and resisted the temptation to imitate the non-Western passages. Without recourse to quasi-operatic stridency, his command of vocal and instrumental drama kept things taut over most of the work's one-hour span.

By the same token, his chosen texts rightly avoid poetic embellishment, thus allowing the music room to breathe, and Blackford's mostly syllabic settings never degenerate into the sing-song recitative that passes for vocal expression in so much contemporary music. Even in choral passages, delivered by the combined forces of the Bach Choir and New London Children's Choir, the poetry hit home word by chilling word.

That rare attention to verbal detail was matched by the soloists. Tenor Gergory Kunde, baritone Gerald Finley and mezzo Catherine Wyn-Rogers would grace any opera house, and they seemed grateful for the unexaggerated, broadly expressive vocal lines. This was the première of Blackford's new version for full orchestra (the Philharmonia Orchestra), and David Hill conducted with the fervour of the convert.

To follow, Williams Walton's shamelessly raucous *Belshazzar's Feast*, in a performance so full-blooded that, as the chorus galloped towards the final 'Alleluia!', Hill's baton flew 15 feet into the air, threatening to impale someone in the stalls. Finley's solo contributions were solemnly sonorous, the augmented Philharmonia threw caution to the winds, and the Bach Choir sang as if its life depended on it.