

Transcribed from The Daily Telegraph  
22 April 2005

Bach Choir  
Festival Hall

This concert by the Bach Choir and Philharmonia Orchestra was dedicated to the memory of the late Peter Benenson, the doughty lawyer who founded Amnesty International 44 years ago. Appropriately enough, it took exile as its theme.

Exile arouses many emotions - nostalgia for lost homeland, rage at the oppressor that made one flee, longing for freedom, distress at being marooned in an alien culture. They were all evoked in Richard Blackford's hour-long oratorio, *Voices of Exile*.

It was a seamless, cunningly wrought sequence of poems and songs for soloists, chorus and orchestra, the texts inspired - if that is the word - by recent conflicts in Angola, Turkey, Macedonia, and a dozen other places.

Blended into the live sounds were recorded folk songs and poems in the original languages, including one from a 15-year-old girl in a Calcutta slum, recorded by Blackford himself.

In their direct rawness, these were the most moving things in the piece; next to them, the contributions from the three soloists (Catherine Wyn-Rogers, Gregory Kunde and Gerard Finley) were bound to seem too "arty" and sophisticated (an unfair comment, this, as all three soloists were excellent and far from precious - which only goes to show how vulnerable the listening experience is to its context).

As for Blackford's music, its utter sincerity was shown in its impeccable craftsmanship and good taste. And it had genuinely touching moments, particularly in the dignified choral accompaniment Blackford added to the pre-recorded Macedonian folksong. But I kept wishing he would be less tasteful, especially in the setting of Erich Fried's bleak masterpiece, *It Has Happened*, which cried out for something equally stark and uncompromising.

After the interval, exile was again the theme, though this time it was in the hands of a young, very ambitious composer, determined to make a splash, and not half so tasteful as Blackford - William Walton.

His *Belshazzar's Feast* is one of those pieces people are embarrassed to admit they like. Hearing this performance reminded me why. Everything about it is excessive: the rousing triumphal march (sounding much more British Empire than Babylon) the two off-stage brass bands, the kitschy "oriental" glitter of piccolos and xylophones and cymbals.

The choir spat out its lines with splendid venom, the orchestra made a sumptuous noise, and when things reached a frenzy of excitement at the end, conductor David Hill's baton flew from his grasp and described a graceful parabola into the audience. It was wonderful.

**Ivan Hewett**