

Festival inaugurated in fine style

REVIEW

Winchester Festival: Opening Concert in Winchester Cathedral

THE emotional temperature inside the Cathedral matched that of the summer air for the sell-out opening concert of this year's Winchester Festival.

A full-blooded programme of Teutonic Romanticism had been chosen and no energy was spared in its delivery by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and the London-based Bach Choir.

Proceedings commenced appropriately with Wagner's

Mastersingers' Overture, not lugubrious but brisk and purposeful with well contrasted themes for each section of the band.

The latter was suitably restrained for the gorgeous Four Last Songs of Richard Strauss. Scored for very full orchestra and employing rich harmonic textures and frequent cross-rhythms this work can often overwhelm a soloist.

However, Sarah Fox (a Kathleen Ferrier Award winner) was mesmerising in a flow of long-breathed phrases, thrilling dynamics and regal presence.

She took her audience from the seduction of Spring through to the calm thoughtfulness of Sunset — just as shadows

descended on the Cathedral.

This was a commanding interpretation from a fine singer.

Another award-winner, including the 2009 Hampshire Singer of the Year, joined Sarah in Brahms' mighty German Requiem.

Former Winchester lay clerk Jimmy Holliday goes from strength to strength, his rich bass-baritone being admirably suited to this building.

Both soloists projected well from the pulpit and their clear German diction was matched by that of the Bach Choir.

This justly famous body exudes confidence and authority with vibrant, ringing tone, a good dynamic range and natural attention to details

such as phrase-endings and intonation.

The choir's familiarity with this music — little reliance on copies here — reflected that of their director.

David Hill, making a welcome return to the city, conducted the Brahms without score and was thus able to communicate vividly every choral nuance and moderate the occasionally exuberant accompaniment.

The whole evening was enriched by consummate musicianship and the clearly enthusiastic engagement with this repertoire by all the participants and their large audience.

It inaugurated the week-long Festival in fine style.

Derek Beck