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an extract from "In Tune"

The Quarterly Newsletter from the Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir

Welsh Wow!

'Terrific!', 'Wonderful evening's entertainment!', 'First class', 'Wow!'... my thoughts precisely, but, in fact, they were responses from the full-house audience (some first-timers) on leaving the auditorium on St David's Day to my front-of-house farewell, 'Thank you for coming - hope you enjoyed it?'

When the stage curtains first opened at Abingdon School's Amey Hall to reveal the choir in its new formal livery of red jackets, black trim and trousers, there were audible gasps before the genuine praise of welcoming applause. The boys looked very good - and, by golly, could they sing, too!

Rousing tunes, folk songs, memorable and catchy, melancholy when they needed to be, loud and soft, fast and slow and always word perfect and clear to the ear - it was all there for our delight.

As a member of the audience, once you've checked out the whole spectacle and then each and every member of the choir, conductor Emily Stamoulis' dramatic movements are an entertainment in themselves. She is a joy to watch. It is so obvious that she is drawing out the best of each section when it's their turn to take the lead.

Her head and whole body vibrates with the sheer exuberance of a master totally immersed in the musical mayhem of a job being well done. And her hands in leading, pointing, shaping and ending the pieces appear to have a mind of their own. But they know she's in charge - and never forget the plot. I loved it when, taking a bow towards the end, she turned to the choir and bestowed a little handclap to the boys. It appeared that she was nodding 'well done!'. In that simple gesture, we appreciate what must have gone into the whole show - lots of hard training, learning, presentation and production - to make it come over, and acknowledged by the conductor, as the great team effort that it is.

I wonder if the excellent pianists Geoffrey Cowan and Lucie Smitkova could be encouraged to emerge from behind their instrument to take a well-earned bow front-stage on occasions, too? They are literally unsung heroes and equally important cogs in the well-oiled machine.

The idea to bring Lyn Davies from the back to the front row - after his hilarious monologue on St David, the national vegetable and a certain cuddly red dragon - to lead by example the very Welsh pronunciation of Myfanwy, was an excellent one. I suspect his accent, tone and clarity in this love-song always spur on more English members to get it right on the night!

If I have any criticism, it is that my usual expectations of hair-tingling on the back of the neck from absorbing the unique Welsh choir four-part harmonies, didn't happen this time. Was it the repertoire, the acoustics or the fact that the voices were, unusually, a chair-distance away from each other?

In breaking up the programme of all-male voices, guest artistes mezzo soprano Rhian Williams and harpist Elin Bullock chose most enjoyable pieces. They will, however, be remembered mainly for their presentations in such dulcet accents which underpinned and brought home to everyone the very Welshness of this whole wonderful occasion.

Polly Webb