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SWISS PREMIERE IN LONDON

The Berne Male Choir and the Berne Teachers' Choral Society under the direction of their excellent conductor Francois Pantillon sang Beethoven's *Mass in C* and Heinrich Sutermeister's *Missa da Requiem* in the Festival Hall on Monday, 12th July.

It was, even to our inexperienced ears, a masterly performance. The hall was 60 per cent full, an occupation factor which was quite satisfactory to the Embassy, who played a great part in organising the event.

It is apparently unusual for this vast hall to be so favourably filled for the performance of modern music, especially for the English premiere of the work of an unknown foreign composer. It may be that much of the public came to listen to the *Mass in C* which was played during the first half of the concert.

However, the rows of seats remained as filled after the interval as before and only a handful of listeners—who were probably incapable of digesting anything composed after Berlioz—left the hall during the performance of the *Missa da Requiem*. It was silly of them because Sutermeister's work was to our mind superior to the *Mass in C*, which is not Beethoven's best and whose cloying romanticism is not as soothing as the mellow harmonies of the *Missa da Requiem*.

The concert had a good review in the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph*. This is what the *Guardian* critic had to say:

German composers we have long welcomed with open arms, and the French are now more tolerated than they used to be: Even figures like Hon-egger and Frank Martin are known only through a handful of pieces and to hear their bigger works is something special. Heinrich Sutermeister will be a name known, I suspect, only to the few who in 1953 were occupied with other things than waving Union Jacks. Sadler's Wells put on his "Romeo and Juliet" that year, and this has occasionally been broadcast since. But I recall encountering very little else of his. All the more fitting, then, that his large-scale "Missa da Requiem" (1951-2) should have been heard at a Royal Festival Hall concert in which the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra were joined by the Berne Choir.

The setting offers every evidence of the composer's identification with dramatic values underlying the Latin text, and his setting follows more the intimate example of Fauré rather than Verdi or Berlioz. But it doesn't quite get there. The music's identity is not fully formed. Only in the "Sanctus Benedictus" movement does the music

progress from severe choral counterpoint to a full assertion of lyricism which the two soloists throughout suggest to be the principal objective.

Elsewhere in the work Sutermeister fails to establish proper contrasts to the weighty tonal writing, with its insistent rhythms, that is his usual starting-point. The music becomes still weightier, mushier, and thick wind-chords constantly obtrude. In remaining faithful to the text, also, Sutermeister somewhat subdues his own creative spark and consequently each movement very nearly sounds like the last one.

The "Requiem" was confidently rendered by the Berne Choir (which comprises the City's Male Voice Choir and Teachers' Choral Society) with the Swiss conductor, François Pantillon in charge. In the first part of the concert, this choir proved just right for the Beethoven Mass in C: not full-blooded like many of our own choirs, but with a sonorous range that was equal to the reflective mood of this setting while effectively scaling-down the more portentous outbursts. Occasional details of choral and orchestral balance went awry, but it was still a sensitive reading. Excellent solo-singing—always in tune and perfectly balanced—came from Elizabeth Simon, Norma Procter, Alexander Young and Benjamin Luxton.

There were probably as many as 150 Swiss in the hall. After the performance a few of them joined the singers in a reception offered by the Embassy in the foyer. A member of the Berne Choir made a most laudatory address to his musical friend and guide, François Pantillon, who himself gave an address stressing what an important event the night's performance had been.

Heinrich Sutermeister was there too, busy signing autographs. He had appeared on the podium at the end of the performance and shook hands with the conductor and the soloists in the midst of a gale of applause. Prizes and congratulations were extended to the devoted organisers of an evening which had first been conceived while Mr. René Keller was Swiss Ambassador in London.

Despite the relative box-office success of the evening, it would not have been possible to defray the cost of such a sumptuous performance without a 25,000-franc injection from the Pro Helvetia Foundation. This supplied us and the many guests of the Embassy with free tickets—and with it a rare opportunity of enjoying the largesse of the Swiss State.

(PMB)

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