



ENTERTAINMENTS

World premiere of choral extravaganza

12:14pm Thursday 28th May 2009

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SALISBURY VESPERS, SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

TWO years ago Fiona Clarke, the then director of music of Salisbury Community Choir, had an idea.

With so many choirs and singing groups in Salisbury, why not, for the very first time, commission a major new work from a distinguished composer of choral music, in which all of them could participate, and make this part of the 2009 Salisbury Festival?

And so the Salisbury Chilcott Project, under the chairmanship of John Powell, musical director of St John Singers, was born.

Saturday night, then, saw its fulfilment in the world premiere performance of Bob Chilcott's Salisbury Vespers.

Entering the cathedral on Saturday evening, the enormity of the undertaking became clear.

At the chancel end was Salisbury Musical Society with conductor David Halls, who also directed the whole enterprise, together with half of Salisbury Symphony Orchestra. At the other end were Salisbury Community Choir with director, Jeremy Backhouse, Ian Wicks' Salisbury Cathedral Junior Choir and the other half of the orchestra.

Two sets of singers and players faced each other from opposite ends of the enormous building, the conductors having their backs to each other. Yet they were perfectly co-ordinated.

Then there were other notable contributors – Ben Lamb's Sarum Voices, Daniel Cook's Farrant Singers and John Powell's St John's Singers, largely hidden in the transepts – and, of course, the Salisbury Cathedral Choir who moved unobtrusively around the building, supporting and augmenting the performance.

In the first half of the programme, each choir offered an individual piece, St Johns Singers' excerpt from Chilcott's popular Little Jazz Mass, reminding us how much of his work is written for children to perform.

In Salisbury Vespers, which formed the second half, hymns, antiphons and psalms are interspersed with motets which reflect the Cathedral's original dedication to the Virgin Mary.

Foot-tapping rhythms contrasted with periods of quiet



David Halls conducting rehearsals of the Salisbury Vespers at Salisbury Cathedral. DB5965P01



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contemplation and the work ended with the glorious setting of the Monteverdi-related Magnificat of 1610.

At the end of past performances in the cathedral one has often thought it was a pity that Bach, Handel or other composers had not been there to hear David Halls' interpretation of his or her work.

On Saturday it was satisfying to realise that the composer was actually present in the front row and so was able to accept the compliment of a spontaneous standing ovation from the entire audience, as well as the 630 singers and musicians who contributed to this inspirational project.

- *Anne Hill*

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