

Elora gives new voice to old favourites

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FOR THE RECORD

ELORA

It was a dreary, rain-chilled October day for the Elora Festival Singers to start yesterday afternoon's concert entitled Lift Up Your Heart (the first in their Winter Series) -- but by the end the sun shone brightly as did the spirits of those in attendance.

The concert featured an interesting mix of secular and religious choral pieces from the British tradition, as well as an eclectic range of organ numbers, performed by featured visiting artist James O'Donnell.

The first and earliest work on the program (1622) was Orlando Gibbons' *O Clap Your Hands* (text from the 47th Psalm). This buoyant and joyous polyphony got the choir started at full form, exhibiting a sustained energy and expressiveness throughout.

With O'Donnell at the baton for the first half, the fastidious but not overbearing conductor led the singers through some tricky musical interplay, though appropriately within a contained dynamic band. Herbert Sumsion's *They That Go Down to the Sea*, called for a broader expressive range, which the singers amply provided. The billowing sea swells and the emphatic condemnation "they that stand there like a drunken man" gave the piece the needed bluster and emotional storytelling.

A highlight of the first half was Benjamin Britten's *Hymn to St. Cecilia*. A paeon to music's patron saint, Britten's piece was one in a long line of composers giving similar homage (with special significance as Britten was born on St. Cecilia Day).

The first section of this work tested the accuracy and pitch capabilities of the choir, vacillating between keys in challenging modal form. The second section featured a kind of fugue with multiple layers interwoven with repeated patterns, busy and buzzing. The final section highlighted individual soloists from the choir representing different instruments, finishing this wonderful vocal journey in a sweet melodic vein. This work showcased the singers in their finest form with crisp, accurate singing, as well as a vastly emotive expression of joy in art.

Placed between clusters of choral pieces, O'Donnell's solo organ works provided a fine sense of artistic balance and variety to the concert.

The first was Bach's *Prelude in C* (BWV545). Building from a simple theme, each successive pass added complexity and dimension, finishing with a firm and dramatic swell. O'Donnell's articulation was clean and precise, managing the progressive difficulty with aplomb and control.

The other organ numbers included Messiaen's *Joie et clarte des corps glorieux*, featuring wild and bright, punchy chords in the upper register setting up fleet-fingered jazz-inspired runs all over the keyboard.

The most contemporary piece, *Miroir* (by Ad Wammes), had a light and whimsical air to it, though it was Lois Vierne's *Organ Solo-Carillon de Westminster* that tested the extremes in multi-tasking as the virtuoso demonstrated why he is in demand worldwide on the instrument.

The second half gravitated toward lighter fare. The *Three Shakespeare Songs* (Ralph Vaughan Williams) featured some fun programmatic elements shaping the Bard's texts, including ding-dong bells and a galloping romp "over the hill".

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Summer is Gone*, felt almost barbershop in its melancholy expression, and John Rutter's *The British Grenadiers* evoked a marching snare and national British pride. The traditional *Danny Boy*, and *John Brown's Body* (Glory, Glory Halleluiah!) finished the concert in style -- well-worn tunes presented in a fresh and convincing way, like only the singers can -- pure musical sunshine.