

CHURCH TIMES

Jazz-gospel canticle in Sevenoaks

by TIM BONIFACE

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JOHN FEATHERSTONE

THE British-French composer John Featherstone conducted a splendid première of his trilingual, multi-traditional *Te Deum* at St Nicholas's, Sevenoaks, last month.

Placing the first-rate Bath Camerata chamber choir (singing in Latin) in the centre of two jazz/gospel vocal quartets (one singing in English, one in French), accompanied by a top-class jazz quartet, Featherstone made



clear his desire to use this ancient hymn of praise as a call for collaboration and appreciation across musical traditions, and an increased inter-cultural dialogue.

A description of the first movement will serve to outline the general pattern of the work. After an instrumental introduction, the choir deliver the opening lines with a striking unaccompanied chord — full and “glorious”, but with its subtle internal dissonance evident as it rings out. This introduction then gives way to a steady groove from the jazz group, over which a gospel choir sing one of Featherstone’s accessible and yet evocative gospel melodies to the same text in English, before that is punctuated by, and then intertwined with, the French quartet, again with the equivalent text.

The two groups sing one after the other and together, leading to a rich climax that the Camerata brings to a close, restating the opening phrase. The whole work proceeds with variations on this pattern, sometimes with the jazz/gospel singers opening a movement, sometimes with the Camerata setting the scene, and some extended instrumental sections. No movement is left to one style or language, meaning that the overlap of tongues and traditions is always at the forefront.

Featherstone’s vocal harmonies are his real strength. The choral sections, often mini-motets in their own right, are reminiscent of Vilette or Duruflé, with a Morton Laurisden-like thickness. The quartet sections, too, usually avoid traditional “pop” voicings, opting for a richer harmonisation. Where the melodies of the contemporary sections — sometimes as akin to worship songs as gospel choruses — tread a little close to cliché, Featherstone usually

pulls us away just in time with a nuanced harmonic twist, a creative use of dynamics, or the introduction of the Camerata again.

The balance of the work is probably more towards a softer gospel/contemporary style than anything else, but there is enough creativity for those whose preferences lie elsewhere, and the linguistic overlap is always stimulating and powerful across all styles.

The performance itself was superb: the Bath Camerata have exquisite balance and tone, and the two vocal quartets deftly navigated Featherstone's harmonies with palpable joy and intensity. The jazz group, too, boasted some heavyweight players, with Pete Long (saxophone, clarinet) and Pedro Segundo (drums, percussion) adding real class. Live, John Featherstone's *Te Deum* was an excellent event, but this manifestly worshipful and passionate work is certainly worth owning on the well-recorded CD, available in the autumn.

english.johnfeatherstone.com

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