

Choral director Stephen Layton is contemplating the upcoming St John's Smith Square Christmas Festival from his set of rooms overlooking Great Court at Trinity College, Cambridge. Somewhat fittingly in light of the college's illustrious mathematical history, there's a concatenation of significant birthdays and numbers to celebrate this year: the festival is 30 years old (this year's edition being the 31st festival) and Layton has been there for 20. He also celebrates his own 50th birthday this December, as he celebrates each birthday, by conducting the final concert in the series – the well-known and loved St John's Smith Square Christmas *Messiah*. His group Polyphony turns 30 this year, too; and Layton has been at the helm here at Trinity for 10 years. An opportunity both to celebrate and to reflect, then – and neither celebration nor reflection is in short supply within the festival's programme.

There's a veritable choral feast on the menu, with early delicacies from the Gesualdo Six, the Cardinal's Musick, La Serenissima and the Tallis Scholars; high-calibre chapel-choir offerings from Christ Church and Merton representing Oxford, Trinity and Clare representing Cambridge, and King's College London; contemporary consort programmes from Ex Cathedra and Tenebrae; larger choral offerings from the City of London Choir and the Holst Singers; organist David Titterton and the National Youth Theatre offering even more varied fare; and finally, the two big finishers – the aforementioned *Messiah* and a Mass in B minor, both with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment.

Something that strikes me about the festival is that it's curated with a very light touch; there's no tightly managerially-controlled uniting theme in the programming, and all of Layton's invited artists seem to retain a high degree of artistic autonomy – yet there's minimal programme overlap across an extensive Christmas choral festival. How does Layton begin putting this together?

'We've had a lot of groups who have a following, where we know that their concerts go well and that their concerts are trusted by the audience. And that's the most important thing, rather than having an artistic policy that seeks to control. If you're only going to produce a certain type of music you're inevitably going to

limit the appeal of what you're doing to a certain niche market. I suppose the only way in which one would say it's curated in any way with any strength is that it's tried to be the very opposite to what is celebrated in some of the bigger halls in London – I think of the Christmas-spectacular type things – and these are marvellous type of things, but this is very much in contrast to that. Many interesting and sometimes quite risky things take place in this festival, on the back of this *Messiah*, and they've developed a bigger audience base, and everybody's winning artistically, and I think Joe Punter is winning too with this incredibly wide sophisticated choice of things that they can go to that are Christmas-appropriate.'

It's the only major festival that overtly seeks to showcase and to celebrate the 'Oxbridge choral tradition' in the context of other choral traditions. I wondered where Layton would place himself within

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that possibly invidious notion, given that one of his major personal legacies to the tradition will be the indefatigable fashion in which he has broadened its repertoire, notably with Baltic and American musics.

'Interesting question! I'm a product of it, that's the thing! – and I've become all the more aware of it through the travelling I've done. I've met many interesting choirs and groups and conductors and composers on my travels, but I've realised all the more clearly the uniqueness of what is this British choral tradition. It's got to stem back historically to the fact that the choirs in our cathedrals survived the various revolutions that we've had in the country, whereas in France for instance they didn't – the organs did, but not the choirs. I suppose I've just twigged that what's been built into me through those things, I believe, is very precious, and I feel blessed and fortunate that somehow it has been imbued in me, and then I feel I just want to tell everybody about it because I'm quite excited by it and want people to share in it, because if I'm getting

excited I know that others will as well, and I want them to share in it – so I want to spread the news.'

Layton clearly remains bursting with creative energy, and certainly shows no signs of slowing down. As he marks so many significant numbers, though, what makes him most proud as he looks back on what he's covered thus far? He's an intensely modest man, and the question causes him to go very quiet.

'I'd like to think ... that if somebody had to say when I'd died ... that there was a sound, that when I was with my musicians, there was a sound that they knew. I suppose that I feel a strength of conviction in the inner voice that I hear, of the sounds that I'm wanting to bring to life, and I hear an unshakeable something in my head, that is a voice, that I know that I'm trying to create in this sound, and I've been aware of that for quite a long time. I'd be very proud if people could hear that when they listen to the music-making.'

I have no doubt that that is the case. The musical examples that Layton sings me during the hour or so we spend together, though throwaway and off-the-cuff, all have a certain centred-ness about them, a core of emotional integrity pointing to a terrifically strong inner ear, and it's undoubtedly this that's responsible for Polyphony's and Trinity's burnished sounds, refined but reined in with 'glow' rather than insipidity. I wonder what is next on the horizon?

'I'm about to do a recording of what to me is the Everest of the whole thing. In January I'm about to record the *B-minor* Mass, and so that feels to me like the most extraordinarily privileged situation to have ever found myself in – that I should be able to do that. And I haven't done it yet and I'm not counting my chickens, either, on it, and it's a humbling and an awesome prospect that I'm even considering that I'm even daring to try it. I think it's got so much stuff shrouded in mists about it as to what the composer might have intended and what his forces were and how fast was this, and it's just impossible to answer, and so you've just got to go with what you feel. Scholarship will only get you so far.'

A salutary message for any early musician, perhaps.

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