

Eleven days after this auspicious debut came a very welcome chance to hear the latest addition to an imposing and consummately crafted cycle, namely Graham Williams' Eighth String Quartet, premiered on 25 January 2015 by the Carducci Quartet at the Royal Academy of Music's David Josefowitz Recital Hall. This provided further evidence of the composer's mastery of the form. All excess padding was excised from a lean and compact 20-minute piece that forced every note to earn its place in the score.

A powerful impression of inter-relatedness between movements stems from the fact that all four of them are based upon the 17-bar introduction. Simplicity was the keynote as the measured opening statement unfolded with interrogatory phrases and their rejoinders leading to an arching, soaring first violin line graced with tiny ornamental figures. These were the essential ingredients which fuelled the entire score and it is a tribute to the protean qualities of this prefatory statement and the composer's skill in teasing out new facets of it that there was no sense of undue uniformity or a restricted

scope as the work developed. The first movement's main section, marked 'Con energica', explored fully the rhythmic and melodic implications of its preamble; there was also a suggestion of *moto perpetuo* in its motoric pulse and open ending. The ensuing scherzo-like movement was driven by *staccato* exclamations and contained at its centre a lyrical variant of the quartet's opening statement. At the heart of the work was a sombre slow movement whose nocturnal quality was heightened by judicious use of shimmering *tremolandi*. A predominantly lively finale slowed for a more contemplative middle portion before the trenchant closing section.

Though the score's thematic cohesion was formidable and arguably of primary importance, there were many opportunities for interplay between the four protagonists and, in the slow movement especially, rewarding sinewy thematic lines. Graham Williams has produced an authentic work for string quartet which capitalises on the intimacy, homogeneity and flexibility of the form. The Carducci responded with a polished and committ-

ed reading, alive to the music's variegated textures as well as its structural coherence.

This first performance took place as part of 'Music Past and Present' and, sadly, it appears that this concert series, of which Graham Williams is Artistic Director, may now have ended after 21 years. In addition to featuring Williams' own pieces, this series has also launched new works by such diverse composers as Tansy Davies, John Hawkins, Thomas Hyde, Enid Luff, Cecilia McDowall and Lloyd Moore, set in the context of established classics. It is to be hoped fervently that 'Music Past and Present', vital to the renewal of the repertoire, will be able to continue in some incarnation in the future. On a more positive note, it is excellent news that Graham Williams has already written two more quartets since he completed the Eighth in January 2014 and I look forward to attending the premieres of these pieces in due course. He is a natural writer for this exacting combination of instruments and a wider recognition of his achievement by means of frequent performances and recordings is long overdue.

Paul Conway

Holocaust Memorial Day Concert

Holocaust Poems by the Polish poet Jerzy Ficowski (1924-2006) set to music by British composer Julian Dawes formed the poignant centrepiece of a moving Holocaust Memorial Day Concert at the Polish Embassy in London on January 28, presented in association with Spiro Ark. Polish Ambassador Witold Sobków highlighted the significance of concert, marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, and welcoming several invited survivors amongst the large audience. Sobków stressed the importance of Poland as a 'repository of remembrance' and the need to pass on memories, however painful, to future generations, noting that the music "would allow us to reflect on what had happened in those dark days". Introduced by the composer, Julian Dawes's *Songs of Ashes*, settings of fifteen poems from Ficowski's *A Reading of Ashes*, is a powerfully moving cycle in which the dramatic and often sardonic musical idiom matches the intensity of the poetic imagery. It is unique amongst the composer's thirteen song cycles,

commissioned by the Spiro Institute in 1992 and has been performed and broadcast across the UK and in Israel.

The soloist here was the young British soprano Katherine Crompton accompanied superbly by Jo Ramadam, both of whom characterised vividly the often harrowing texts. Clashing major and minor triads and Messiaen-like harmonies express an anguished mood in the framing piano introduction and epilogue. Sinewy melody over rhythmic solid harmony evoked bitter imagery in the first song, *The Wailing Wall*, with its mixed metaphor of ancient Temple and gas chambers. After a climactic rendition of *The Assumption of Miriam From the Street in the Winter of 1942* (its title already laced with pathos), the duo projected the emotion of *Seven Words* with intensity, impassioned lyricism over a relentless backcloth of repeated dissonances. Fervent cantorial melisma in *I did not manage to save* contrasted with the desolation in *The Book*, matching images of empty synagogues and silence, the decimation of Polish Jewry. Ficowski's biting use of

language was precisely evoked through caustic wit, ironic dances in mock cabaret style. In *A Girl of Six*, the death of a starving infant is depicted in an innocent waltz set out of kilter in a limping five beat pattern, like a cracked mirror; bluesy swing rhythms heighten the horror of *Jewish Effects* whilst frustration arises through the slinky ostinato to *The Silence of the earth*. Intensity resumes in 'Completion', with its extremely high lines, '5.8.42' and *The Way to Yerushalyim*, a ternary form that evokes the *ashes* in contrast to the bustling life of its central verses. The lamenting *A throng of Stones* leads back to chorale-like epilogue, recalling the meditative *Elegie* (1988) for violin and piano that had opened the concert, performed by violinist Sophie Lockett with pianist Mitra Alice Tham. Dawes's *Songs of Ashes*, which one hopes may soon appear on CD alongside much more by the same composer, affirmed the power of song to stir the soul in even the most harrowing of subjects, apt for a commemorative event that was both moving and memorable.

Malcolm Miller