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Beryl Gray

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Beryl Gray

The Gladness of the World: A Celebration of George Eliot in Words and Music. Coventry Cathedral, Saturday, 27 November, 1993.

The Gladness of the World (the title is a quotation of the concluding words of George Eliot's religiously humanistic poem, 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible') was a wide-ranging, often moving, programme of readings of passages from George Eliot, and of music for mezzo-soprano, choir (and choir soloists), and solo instrumentalists.

The rich variety of Gabriel Woolf's programme of readings in which he was joined by Canon Michael Sadgrove represented the extraordinary scope of the author's achievements, and succeeded both in conveying a sense of the development of her own life, and in bringing before the audience some of the lives - Mrs Poyser, for example, and the Dodson sisters - that she had created. The poignant Brother and Sister sonnets encapsulated the abiding significance to George Eliot of the experience and affections of childhood.

Her poetry proved to be a prominent feature of the programme. We heard extracts from *The Legend of Jubal* and *Stradivarius*, whose spirit was brilliantly evoked by some unaccompanied Bach, beautifully played by an 'invisible' violinist (Tamsin Howes). But the climax of the evening was unquestionably Paul Leddington Wright's grand, anthem-like setting for choir and soloist of 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible'. Marjorie Bruce's rendition was glorious and triumphant, while, under the direction of the Reverend Nigel Guthrie, the members of St Michael's Chamber Choir fulfilled their role with conviction, and without threatening to overwhelm the soloist. This was no mean feat, because the acoustics of Coventry Cathedral are extremely difficult - certainly for the listener, and presumably for the performer.

Despite the Cathedral's vastness, Marjorie Bruce (who also gave us two settings by Stanford of lines from *The Spanish Gypsy*) transmitted all the appeal of Schumann's 'Mignon', and Nicholas Burt tantalizingly played one movement of a Mozart piano sonata. However, the musical emphasis of the evening was English, and strongly on the late nineteenth century. Apart from Mendelssohn's 'I waited for the Lord', the choir sang pieces by Parry, Elgar, Sullivan, Stanford, and Pearsall (who does belong to the earlier part of the century). Essentially, therefore, the Celebration was balanced between words that, appropriately, were George Eliot's own, and music which would have been entirely unfamiliar to her. Since music was so crucial to her life and to her thinking, I confess I should have liked to hear more of the music that influenced her; that she chose to listen to and to play. That aside, it must be said that *The Gladness of the World* was a fitting tribute to the great Coventry author.