

11 May 2017

When June Tyzack says to the TSO Chorus “Would anyone like to come and sing with me in Berlin?” there’s an immediate and enthusiastic response.

The occasion is the annual Mitsingkonzert 2017 in the Berliner Philharmonie Concert Hall. The Berlin Radio Choir conducts a ‘Big Sing’ type event every year. In 2017 they will be performing Durufle’s Requiem.

We immediately set to learning the work. Some choristers are already familiar with it.

Then, at various times in April and May, 26 choristers set off in ones and twos with Berlin as our destination, but many and varied routes and stopovers there and back.

As we farewell each departure with cries of “See you in Berlin” the anticipation grows.

By 12 May, we’ve all arrived in Berlin (via UK, Denmark, Prague, Vienna and many other places).

We are immensely privileged to have been invited to attend a rehearsal of the Berlin Radio Choir with conductor Simon Halsey.

The Haus der Runfunken – the Berlin Radio House – contains a purpose built choir studio with tiered seating in a semicircle and excellent acoustics.

Simon Halsey is very welcoming and generous with his time. He spends ten minutes telling us the fascinating history of the choir.

Because of Berlin being divided in 1961, and then reunified in 1989, there are 4 opera houses, 2 orchestras and 2 choirs. The Berlin Radio Choir has 63 members because there was funding for 100 singers and the West got two thirds, and the East one third, so they do different repertoire.

The Berlin Radio Choir specialises in the romantic repertoire and uses contracted singers for bigger works. They’re all employed as professionals and rehearse around 30 hours a week. We may have a scoop involving performances closer to home in 2018!

Their sound is absolutely sublime – the altos have a deep and dark colour unlike any altos I’ve heard and at one stage when the altos and tenors sing together it’s impossible to distinguish between the parts. Apparently they didn’t have that blend yesterday but worked on it at their rehearsal and today is the result.

That night we attend a local rehearsal of a community choir. They are expecting a choir of 25 black people from Tanzania so they’re a little disappointed with us, and we’re a little disappointed with their knowledge of the work which we’re due to perform in two days. Once more we reflect on how lucky we are with the standard that June expects and receives from the TSO Chorus.

Sunday 14 May is the day when over 1000 people from all over Europe (and Tasmania!) converge on the concert hall for a day of rehearsing culminating in a public performance at 4 pm.

From the moment I take my seat in the Berliner Philharmonie Concert Hall I can’t stop smiling. The second altos have scored seats right in front of the podium – nine rows from the front. The choir surrounds the stage on all sides.

Simon Halsey speaks in a seamless blend of German and English in the round so we always know what’s going on. He introduces us as getting the award for the greatest dedication to music for

travelling from Australia to take part. We get a huge round of applause and people talk to us all day so we feel like minor celebrities.

The Berlin Radio Choir and Orchestra are sublime.

It all comes together for the performance and Ubi Caritas, the first of four Duruflé Motets performed by the Berlin Radio choir, brings me to tears.

We are so lucky to have June Tyzack and Simon Rogers creating such amazing opportunities for us.