

## Things are looking up

October 2010

‘If you make any noise you’ll be thrown out.’

Hardly the warmest of Venetian welcomes, but then this was no ordinary visit to St Mark’s Basilica. Escaping the tourist Babel in the square, we were shepherded down into the crypt, gloomy, gritty-floored, low-ceilinged. Nooks and crannies of bare brick afforded a little privacy as we changed into concert black. A communal unisex dressing room wasn’t top of my wish-list when booking my choral course, but after a week’s intensive singing and socialising with sixty strangers, they were strangers no more. A shared purpose – showcasing our music at Saturday evening Mass – meant we just got on with it, conscious that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Unfazed by the unaccustomed choir formation and lack of a warm-up or sound-check, we filed in with dignity under the curious gaze of the packed congregation. The monotone of the priest contradicted everything we’d been taught about vocal expression, but in the incense-solemn atmosphere it was entirely appropriate, and the perfect foil for our choral contributions. It also provided a peaceful soundtrack to my unhurried contemplation of the famous mosaic domes, a cacophony of craftsmanship cradling saints galore in celestial gold.

Our first piece, Victoria’s *O Quam Gloriosum* said it all. The surges of joyful harmony weren’t designed to compete with the spectacle above, but the cadences hovered there beautifully, just long enough to add a little extra sparkle to the gilding. Eyes were drawn up to that brilliance time after time as if by magnetism, and I only noticed the genius of the geometrical floor tiles on the way out. The crowd wasn’t in a hurry to leave; after being dismissed with a blessing, they nevertheless stayed put for our final offering. The serenity of Whitacre’s contemporary *Lux Aurumque* floated heavenward, the golden light welcomed by a spontaneous, unexpected round of applause.

After the spiritual feast it was time to feed the body. As with our musical notes, this needed to be pitched perfectly. Would we take a meandering Grand Canal vaporetto to Santa Lucia station, followed by an hour up the track back to base in Conegliano, and still find anywhere open? Or splash out on a meal in Venice and risk missing the last train? Common sense told us to split the difference and eat near the station, but full of post-performance confidence a sextet of us opted for a trattoria within singing distance of the Basilica. So relaxed were we over fine food, laughter and a bottle or two of Prosecco that time got out of control like an ill-disciplined choir. Espressos jettisoned, a dash for the jetty saw the hourly vaporetto disappear. A stroll through Venice’s labyrinthine side streets in golden sunshine is highly recommended, but a deadline-driven route march after dusk is a risky business. Thank heavens for the system of yellow plaques high on the walls – ‘*Alla Ferrovia*’ – like beacons in the gondola-blackness. Home and dry.