

Matthew Coleridge made his first visit to Buckfast Abbey in 2019 when showcasing his newly composed *Requiem*. Since then, this has taken on a life of its own and is now regularly performed around the world and reached the top 50 of Classic FM's Hall of Fame in 2024. So it was fitting that Matthew should return to the Abbey on a glorious spring day to introduce his new cantata, *The Breath of Life*. An eight movement celebration of life, and the world around us with powerful texts by Kahlil Gibran, Rabindranath Tagore, Albert Einstein, John Muir and Christopher Smart.

The workshop brought together 100 singers. Under Matthew's direction they spent the day working hard and forming a united well balanced choir. Their sound was well focused and for the most part dealt with the large acoustic of the Abbey very well. The choir opened with a boisterous performance of Stanford's Psalm 150. A good choice allowing the singers to really sing out and relax! A last minute addition to the programme was his *Agnus Dei (Requiem)* which reminded us of where this journey began 6 years ago.

In contrast to the massed voices it was lovely to hear the smaller vocal group selected from the Dartington Community Choir singing *My Beloved Spake*. This well-crafted miniature was beautifully paced, allowing the harmonies time to resonate.

We were treated to some brilliant string playing by the Lyric Quintet. Lyric Chamber Orchestra is a relatively new addition to South Devon and bring passion and a wealth of experience to their playing. From the Ravel *Quartet in F Major* to Matthew's own, *And there was light*, the quartet made a sublime sound in this generous acoustic.

The climax of the concert was of course the premiere of *The Breath of life*. Talking to singers beforehand there was a real feeling of excitement and amazement at what they had achieved but with a hint of in trepidation as well! Singers commented on how much thought Matthew had put into the choice of text and how moving and poignant they were.

And so from the very first chord the choir felt secure under the calm guidance of Matthew as he steered this mighty choral force through some absolutely beautiful music. The music challenges the singers in every possible way. From the intense rhythmic homophonic passages (not easy in the large acoustic) to the sublime 8 part singing in *Arise, the breath, the life* where the choir produced a serene blanket of sound. There were so many moods to conquer too. From thunder and lightning to the stillness of the trees, the choir managed dynamic contrast well.

Throughout the work we see Matthews's natural gift for melodic vocal lines and warm colourful harmonies at work. He enjoys entwining vocal and instrumental lines creating a rich tapestry. Having the quintet and Andrew Millington at the organ added colour and a solid bedrock of support.

This was a moving first performance and a standing ovation by all paid tribute to this highly respected composer.

We wait in anticipation until this time next year when the new album is released. If anyone would like to contribute to the recording of this album any gift would be immensely appreciated: <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/matthew-coleridge-new-album>