

Jazz on a Summers Day

Ascension Day service – St. Martins in the Fields

Lying abed, early one morning, listening to Radio 4, as is my wont. I heard that the BBC were broadcasting live a Jazz Eucharist on Ascension Day at St. Martins at 8pm and that listeners were invited to join the congregation. In a trice I resolved, dear readers, to be in that number.

Being a jazz aficionado with tastes ranging from Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton to Pat Metheny and Herby Hancock I hurried on down to Charing Cross station accompanied by the ubiquitous Mr. Shorter. On arrived and St.M in F we found a three hundred yard queue. Luckily the doors had not yet opened and we were able to get seats slightly behind a pillar, as there were many reserved for the BBC and other hangers on.

The setting for the Eucharist was from the “Sacred Concerts” composed by the great Edward Kennedy Ellington know as “Duke” and the ensemble performing these were called the “Big Buzzard Boogie Band”, which caused momentary apprehension, but when they started to play they were really impressive and did they swing? Yes indeedy. The BBC singers and a group called “Exaltate” formed the excellent choir.



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After some rehearsal also involving the congregation conducted by the well known produced Steven Shipley, we heard the beeps signalling 8pm and knew we were ‘live’. We launched in to “Christ is the King” but with a gap in-between every verse to allow the band to play (quite novel!)

After the prayers of Penitence the band played “Praise God” by Ellington and then his “Majesty of God” before the Gospel. The sermon was by the Bishop of Liverpool who said that Ellington was a great Christian and speculated that his forebears were probably slaves. The bishop had visited slave quarters and slave ships at Richmond, Virginia and was so moved that he had wept. He went on to say how bewildered his daughter had been to hear her father’s voice in

their house when she knew he was away on a trip. She had raced from room to room trying to find him without success. Actually her mother had had Radio 4 on and the Bishop had been broadcasting ‘Thought For The Day.’ The story illustrated that although we cannot always see him God is always there.

Just before the peace the band played “Freedom” and after the Eucharistic Prayer “Almighty God” whilst during communion they did “Come Sunday” (well known to BPC choir.)

It was all over too soon and finally we sang “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” with a suitable jazz phrasing – rather more Negro Spiritual than Twickenham. Nobody wanted to leave and we got chatting with other people attending whilst the band slid into “In a Sentimental Mood” with a delicate piano introduction leading into smooth playing by the brass. All agreed it had been a blast!

Jack Mountford