Thursday’s Choral Concert presented four World Premieres of vocal works by MMus candidates who will receive their degrees this autumn. The Choir was conducted by one of the composers, Benjamin Cramer, who in addition to composition is also a candidate in conducting.

The first thing that impressed me was the current size of the Chamber Choir. It is an impressively large ensemble boasting a sound span rich and powerful enough to produce well balanced chords reaching from deepest basses to soaring sopranos - more about this to follow later! There were, I should say, as I listened and watched no passengers whatsoever in this choir.

The range of compositional styles presented by the three composers on Thursday was astounding. These ranged from imaginative avant-garde to more traditional choral writing. In every case though, imagination and creativity were well to the fore.

Celestial Light by Benjamin Cramer was the work that served to open the performance. For this piece the choir remained unseen in the ante-chapel behind the audience. We heard a low note held on the organ and played by John Frederick Hudson. Above it blossomed a series of slowly mutating chords using varied vowel sounds sung by different groups in the choir. It was like a multicoloured fractal sound pattern that changed and evolved as if having a life of its own. The variations of vowel sounds added an extra range of colour along with changes in pitch, vocal groupings, harmony and so forth. The organ support developed and enriched too as the work progressed. I was reminded of some of the music of György Ligeti or even Gaelic Psalm singing although these were distant impressions and Benjamin Cramer’s piece was both new and unique – the voices becoming the disembodied partners of the organ while retaining their human qualities. Isn’t it surprising too that human voices used in this way can sound quite extra-terrestrial? Think of the female voices used by Gustav Holst at the end of The Planets. There was something of that in this piece too – after all its title is Celestial Light.

Ridge by Simon Hellewell used an even more surprising palette of vocal technique. The composer informed us that when he is not composing music he is climbing mountains especially in winter where he finds an exciting blend of beauty and danger. His piece for soprano and piano was in three movements entitled Whiteout, 30 Degrees and Spindrift. I should mention that the 30 Degrees refers not to a temperature but to the slope where avalanches are likely to take place.

The combination of solo soprano and piano might sound quite traditional. Well, not a bit of it. The piano played by Andrew Fowler had been “prepared” with splices of wood between the strings. Fowler also plucked and strummed the strings inside the piano in many different ways as well as stabbing at notes on the keyboard. The vocal part was as in the previous piece largely wordless using many different vowel sounds, a huge dynamic range and different mouth shapes to alter the sound. The singer, our magnificent soprano, Jillian Bain Christie gave us an astonishing tour de force in her performance. By singing into the piano with its lid raised, the duo worked together, the pianist using pedal or held notes to allow the voice to echo with groups of piano
strings. The three movements were astonishingly powerful in their atmospheric power. I felt they painted the most astonishingly vivid pictures suggested by titles of the three contrasting movements. One thing did strike me however. When we were able to see exactly how the sounds were produced, it let us into the secret of this sound world. Would we have reacted differently if we had only been able to hear the sounds without finding out how they were generated?

Funeral Sentences was the second work by Benjamin Cramer to be performed on Thursday. Most of the texts would have been familiar to those with a Christian background many having been set by other composers: “I know that my Redeemer liveth” for example. It was with this piece that I return to the idea of wide-spanning chords sung by the large choir. The harmonies in this work belong to what I would dare to call the modern new tonalism as espoused so successfully by Paul Mealor or Morten Lauridsen. These harmonies cast a fresh light on tonal writing. This does not mean that these composers are all the same – far from it. But they have a certain family feeling. Cramer’s resolutions of his harmonies were often very surprising – at the end of the second section on the words “but with these same eyes”. This was surprising – not going where one would expect, but it worked and brought me a feeling of surprise and delight. These moments recurred throughout the work. I loved the vocal solos sung by Karen Proctor, Mhairi Sharp and Matthew Burns. They added a special leavening to the music.

The final performance was in many ways the most traditional – a setting of five poems by different authors ranging from a young contemporary lyricist Skyler Wixom, Brigham-Young University, Idaho, another American poet, Carl Sandberg (1878-1967) Chicago, Arthur Symons (1865-1945) Wales, Alfred Lord Tennyson whom most people will have heard of and Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866) England. A composer’s choice of lyrics is an important one and in his choral song cycle entitled Mariner Songs Michael Merrill as with Elgar’s Sea Pictures for instance has brought these disparate poems together into a wonderfully cogent and I thought quite moving whole. I liked the way that the composer especially towards the end of the work bound his poems together with a segue and back references. His use of strong melodic lines in his writing suggested the influence of composers like Vaughan Williams although his writing goes well beyond that. Attractive solo passages were sung by soprano Karen Proctor, tenor Kevin Cameron in Carl Sandberg’s Young Sea, a lovely fulsome alto solo by Sarah LeBrocq in Before the Squall by Arthur Symons and baritone Ross Cumming in Tennyson’s poem Hateful is the Dark-Blue Sky. The almost whispered male voices repeating the words “Let us alone” were most effective. Finally in the last poem by Thomas Lane Peacock, Beyond the Sea, the solo vocal quartet were brought together supported by the choir then the work closed with deliciously fine piano playing by John Frederick Hudson. His playing here and throughout Mariner Songs helped to make this final work, for me at least, the most deeply moving of all the performances.