SCO & Gregory Batsleer

Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

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YOU could hardly accuse Gregory Batsleer of playing it safe. Celebrating his tenth anniversary as the SCO's Chorus Director with a full evening conducting both chorus and orchestra, he devised a really rather magical opening to acknowledge Stravinsky's belief that his Mass belongs in the church, not the concert hall. Accordingly, singers and instrumentalists drifted slowly on stage and were ready to perform before we'd even noticed they were there, let alone welcomed them with conventional applause.

It was a small thing, but it gave Batsleer's opener a context and a somewhat flinty focus all its own. The irony, however, was just how lush and sensuous his account of this austere music was, with phrases lovingly caressed into being, astringent harmonies so vivid you could almost touch them.

Batsleer brought a similar enthusiasm to the Haydn Harmoniemesse with which he closed the concert, whose opening Kyrie was almost Elgarian in its noble lyri-

described by Richard E Grant as the funniest man alive, Gray has a history in Scottish theatre and television that ranges from Naked Video to River City, and from pantomime to groundbreaking Scottish productions of Dario Fo farces.

So when he returns to the stage – appearing from behind a flurry of giant pink feather fans wielded by the chorus

cism, and whose leaping, joyful Agnus Dei grabbed the attention and didn't let go. He had a particularly fine, well-balanced quartet of soloists, among whom Edinburgh's own Catriona Morison stood out for her unforced purity and richness right across her range. But stars of the show were the SCO Chorus singers, who earned that position with singing that was strongly defined, expertly balanced and joyfully buoyant. And what's more, you could hear every word they sang.

In between, SCO leader Stephanie Gonley offered non-choral contrast with Bach's A minor Violin Concerto – rather hard-driven, perhaps, but just as distinctive as Batsleer's offerings. More from him, please.

DAVID KETTLE