

SAMIR HUSSEIN / GETTY



Concert
Not in Our Time
 Cheltenham Town Hall

★★★★☆

The spoken utterances of President George W. Bush aren't a composer's usual quarry when searching for texts — I can't think why. But the composer Richard Blackford made up for the neglect in *Not in Our Time*, a piece for soloists, chorus and orchestra pondering on the twin towers' collapse and history's legacy of "holy" wars. Lasting 55 minutes, it was substantial at least in purpose and size.

Premiered on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and presented by Cheltenham Music Festival and Poole Lighthouse, Blackford's creation began with Bush, ended with Obama (cue trumpet and harp) and filled the space between with Pope Urban II, 12th-century Fulcher of Chartres and other observers or stokers of the fire. It suggested the patchwork texts in Jordi Savall's Orient-Occident projects, although the music was far different. Instead of ancient dances and wails, Blackford offered very British noises, distantly following the examples of Britten's War Requiem and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*.

Under the spirited baton of Gavin Carr, the Bournemouth Symphony Chorus gave their shouts and hymns plenty of lung power (the work was written for their centenary). Feisty eloquence tumbled, too, from the tenor Paul Nilon (handed Bush's words to Congress about America's "crusade") and the baritone Stephen Gadd. There was no decibel shortage either from the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

If only there had been greater imagination and character in Blackford's music. I do recognise his challenges: it's easy enough to bluntly conjure the collapsing towers (two loud dissonant chords) or sabre-rattling crusaders. But to properly set Bush to music you really have to be Handel; while a convincing setting of Obama's call to "reimagine the world" probably needs Bach or Haydn. Unable to be any of these, Blackford, a master of music both useful and dramatic, gave us a score of well-meant gestures.

The concert's most touching notes arrived with Barber's song without words, the *Adagio for Strings*. The creakiest came with Copland's Second World War booster, *Lincoln Portrait*, a piece garlanded with presidential speeches that transcend their time, burdened with music that doesn't. Simon Callow proved to be a stentorian reciter giving Lincoln's words dignity and a lick of greasepaint.

Geoff Brown

...ing louder and larger than on disc

ure
 at Bestival, says Ed Pottin

Music Prize jury acknowledged last week. But her bleak meditations were an awkward warm-up for a Saturday night of hedonism, jarring somewhat with the rainbows and peace signs adorning the main stage.

Some had similar fears for the Cure, pigeonholed so often as gloomy Goths, but Robert Smith and his Saturday headliners put them straight with one of the great festival sets. Smith admitted this week that he only wears black because it's slimming, and beneath his lipstick and foundation is a questing imagination that was a perfect fit for the Balearic eclecticism of Bestival. Taking the stage amid tendrils of dry ice, the Cure opened with the plangent synth epic, *Plainsong*, and the next two and half hours brought detours into skiffle pop (*The Love Cats*), brooding electronica (*A Forest*) and life-affirming balladry (*Love Song*). Drilled to military tightness, they sounded as they do on record, only louder and larger, playing most of their hits and finishing with the vintage salvo of *Boys Don't Cry* and *Killing an Arab*.

Topping that was a tall order, even for a one-off such as Björk. The Sunday night headliner had a good crack, with a phalanx of dancers and songs played via her beloved iPad. But it was always going to be an anticlimax after the "Were you there?" mightiness of the Cure's show.

inadvertently invokes the spirits of the past by rubbing a pewter tankard, but

thing. Smooth though they are, the hip-hop crew is outnumbered by both