

EXHIBITION

Drinking in the messages

Water in a thirsty world

ANNA MOORE

Stations of Water

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL, LONDON

AT THE FOOT of Nelson's tomb in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral is a sentence spelled out in mosaic which reads: "England expects every man to do his duty".

In Horatio Nelson's time, doing your duty meant giving your all to the fight to defend Britain: he sent those words as a signal from his flagship HMS *Victory* on 21 October 1805, at the beginning of the Battle of Trafalgar. But what does the sentiment signal today? And what do those words mean in the setting of a vast cathedral, surrounded by a plethora of ornate altars and stunning stained glass, encircled by the crosses and statues that symbolise all that Christian belief holds dear?

That is the question at the heart of "Stations of Water" (runs until 28 October), a series of nine installations within St Paul's commissioned to mark the cathedral's involvement in the JustWater campaign, which focuses on water justice around the world. The theme is developed in a range of ways: in *Safe Harbour* by Jonathan Slaughter, which features nautical ropes ranged at the cathedral entrance, the link is made with the migrants who flee across dangerous seas in search of a safe haven. If we have found our own harbour, Slaughter is asking, surely we should



LIQUID DREAMS: Hope springs from the *Spiral of Life* by Michelangelo Arteaga

think about doing our duty and helping others to find safe harbour, too?

Beyond the magnificent dome are three paintings by Alex Roberts. Two of them, *Reflective Hope* and *Wish/Cleanse*, were inspired by visitors to St Paul's, who come to admire the architecture and the artwork, to contemplate and to pray. Cleverly the third piece in the triptych, *Reveal*, is beneath their feet: it is the figure of a child refugee and you need to peer through a grating to see it.

The artworks are lively, colourful and even funny: the piece by the Anglican priest/artist Regan O'Callaghan, which snakes up one of the cathedral columns, looks like the backbone of a fish and is named after the slippery longfin

eel from his native New Zealand. Look more closely, however, and you realise that each piece of "bone" is a clerical collar – 70 in all, donated by his colleagues. What use is the dog collar, the piece seems to be saying (Regan, who curated the exhibition and who shows me round, is not wearing one). Clerical collars, he explains, are made from some of the worst sorts of pollution-causing plastic.

"Stations of Water" echoes the Stations of the Cross (although there are only nine stations in this show). The most reminiscent of the usual 14 is probably Marcela Montoya-Turnill's *I Thirst*, which has a traditional white-plaster Christ on his cross, shrouded in a white cloth and surrounded by words that symbolise pressing world problems, potential solutions and global trends. So, among some of the last words ever spoken by Jesus are the buzzwords of the ecology movement today: "ecosystems", "sanitation", "hygiene" and "sustainability".

"Stations of Water" continues the cathedral's ambitious programme of contemporary art: this is the home, after all, of Bill Viola's magnificent video-art piece entitled simply *Mary*, and alongside the Grinling Gibbons carvings in the quire, James Thornhill's dome murals and Henry Moore's *Mother and Child*, there have in recent years been interventions by Yoko Ono, Antony Gormley and Rebecca Horn. The final station, fittingly, is both fluid and a prayer: a single bead of water in a glass receptacle by Kelise Franclemont, which seems determined to hover for ever at the base of its container.

I watched it for ages and eventually – and quite quickly, in the end – it shot upwards, a tiny, insignificant droplet heading for heaven, with all our hopes for a better world.

MUSIC

Sacred made simple

An opera in church vestments

ALEXANDRA COGHLAN

Verdi's Requiem, Merry Opera Company

ST JAMES'S PICCADILLY, LONDON

IN 1993 Jonathan Miller staged Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, wedging open the door to sacred repertoire that had been barred shut, and crowding swiftly in came theatre's biggest names – Deborah Warner, Phyllida Lloyd, Katie Mitchell, Peter Sellars – all eager to explore this new territory. Since then we have had fully staged productions of all the great baroque oratorios, along with Verdi's monumental *Requiem* – a Mass whose primary-coloured music is pure theatre.

"Verdi's latest opera, in church vestments," tutted one conductor at the *Requiem's* premiere, and nearly 150 years later it is still a fair point. Yet what this sacred opera most sorely lacks is a narrative. The work's unusual

arrangement of movements – ending not with the transcendence of the "In Paradisum" or the peace of the "Agnus Dei" but the desperate pleas for deliverance of the "Liberate me" – denies it an obvious dramatic arc. Verdi's gruesome vision of hell is not easily forgotten, and any hope of salvation is fragile at best.

John Ramster's new production for the Merry Opera Company (touring the UK through October) only partly solved this problem, but the singing was so blissfully, outrageously excellent that it scarcely seemed to matter. Working with far smaller forces than similar stagings at English National Opera or the Deutsche Oper in Berlin – just 12 singers and the organist Richard Leach here replaced Verdi's mighty chorus, orchestra and quartet of soloists – Ramster transformed a wide-angle work into a close-up of human grief and suffering.

Divisions of solo and chorus and even between individuals collapsed in music that passed freely between singers, all dressed in anonymous neutrals. A solo was suddenly warmed by a supporting voice joining in unison; a chorus suddenly disintegrated into single voices. Most striking were the many

unaccompanied passages, whose energy is less congregational and more familial.

If Merry Opera's cast were just a group of big voices it would be impressive enough; this is not a work that takes any prisoners vocally, and these young singers, deftly conducted by Mark Austin, handled it with startling authority and beauty. But set against the great, roaring intensity of the *Requiem's* climaxes – the howls of the "Dies Irae", the loaded beauty of the "Lacrimosa", the imploring of the "Liberate me", all amplified by the physical proximity of the church setting – were this production's finest moments: the pianissimos. Singing as a consort, blended into a single hushed voice, the 12 performers speak louder than any chorus of hundreds.

Setting his cast free to roam around the church space – encircling the audience, occasionally popping up among them, moving in carefully choreographed patterns – Ramster created a fluid, utterly absorbing drama, albeit it one with no obvious plot. There were inevitably some hieratic, Sellars-style arm gestures, and some rather obvious business with a chalkboard, but otherwise this production's strength is in its simplicity.