

MUSIC

Mixed and matched

A stunning crossover concert

JOANNA MOORHEAD

Classical Kicks!

RONNIE SCOTT'S, LONDON

AS ADVENT kick-offs go, this took some beating. The candles flickered, the congregation was hushed. The stunning Sixteen, with its maestro Harry Christophers on sparkling form, conducted the voices, and "Veni, Veni Emmanuel" rang out over the chink of wine glasses.

Wine glasses? Yes, because this was, for The Sixteen, a venue with a difference. We were in the legendary Soho jazz club, Ronnie Scott's, whose owner Michael Watt, a genial Australian who mingled with the crowd and complimented my husband on his shoes, has been a patron of what is perhaps the country's best-known choir for the last five years.

Bringing the singers celebrated for their sacred music into a club that has known plenty of real life over its 60-year history had been a dream for Watt – and the fact that it was coincidentally the 40th anniversary of the founding of The Sixteen made for the perfect moment.

The evening was a mash-up of styles in every way. We travelled back in time from Consuelo Velázquez's 1930s "Bésame Mucho" (Kiss Me A Lot) to Henry Purcell's "When I am laid in earth", written 250 years earlier, then back further still to the sixteenth century and Thomas Tallis' "O Nata Lux". We spent time in the 1960s, ranging from Jacques Loussier's jazz take on Bach to a version of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech performed partly by a rapper, and partly in Latin. It was the very definition of eclectic, rolling out surprise after surprise; moving and prayerful and lively and energetic in track after track.

And as with time, so with geography: Velázquez penned her most famous song in her native Mexico, when she was just 16 years

old. And from the England of Purcell and Tallis we travelled to the Deep South of America for what was perhaps the highlight of the evening – a rip-roaring rendition of "Down to the River to Pray".

This being The Sixteen, its favourite contemporary composer, James MacMillan, also featured heavily. Most delightful of all was the "Sanctus" from *St Anne's Mass*, and his "Scots Song", where the introduction was arranged by James Pearson, artistic director of Ronnie Scott's, whose piano-playing took the piece to new heights.

Threading the performance together was Lizzie Ball, whose enthusiasm knows no bounds: in her multicoloured boots, with her violin jauntily on her shoulder, classical hits are suddenly, stunningly, on trend. Her rendition of "Bésame Mucho" contrasted with Katy Hill's Purcell, the two wildly different pieces sung back to back. It was an evening crammed with extraordinary talent, where performers from a huge range of different styles were united in a love for music that overrode everything – a parable for our times, in song.