

CHORAL SOCIETY'S SEASONAL SOUNDS

Thurrock Choral Society's Christmas Concert, given on Saturday 6th. December at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Grays , presented the kind of enterprising and enjoyable programme which we have come to expect from this society, but this year with the welcome addition of two audience carols. The *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, repeated from 2013, made an appropriate start to the evening, with Adrian Horsewood a splendid baritone soloist, and the chorus particularly effective in the composer's setting of The Sussex Carol, and in the soft closing bars of the piece.

Then came Finzi's *In Terra Pax*, a hauntingly beautiful work, composed in 1954, in which the Biblical account of the appearance of the angel to the shepherds, and the rejoicing of the heavenly host, is set as a vision experienced by a man wandering in the snowy English countryside on Christmas Eve. Adrian Horsewood was magnificent as the solo narrator, his sustained top F sharp a memorable highlight, whilst soprano Madeleine Ladell sang with a purity of tone particularly suitable to the role of the angel. This is not an easy work for a chorus. This chorus rose to its challenges with considerable success, and there were some nicely judged dynamic contrasts.

After the interval a more modern work: John Rutter's *Magnificat*, first performed in New York in 1990. Like J.S. Bach before him, Rutter inserts into the Latin text of the Magnificat, the Song of the Virgin Mary, a number of other items, including, in Rutter's case, the medieval poem "Of a Rose, a lovely Rose". The work is scored for soprano soloist, chorus and orchestra, and fitted the programme well.

The soprano solos were again beautifully taken and some of the chorus work was allocated to soloists, these including a fine solo tenor in the third movement. Rutter's score also drew some pleasing singing from the chorus. Choral highlights were too numerous to mention, but I must say that the sopranos coped generally well with some very high notes, individual sections, altos and basses for example, were very effective in a number of exposed passages, and a well-sung final "Amen" brought the piece to a triumphant conclusion. The sopranos were then in fine voice for the famous Willcocks descant to "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing".

Musical Director Crispin Lewis conducted throughout with his customary efficiency and musicianship. As always with this society's concerts there was an excellent printed programme, including informative notes on the works, with texts and (where necessary) translations, and biographies of the conductor and rehearsal accompanist. The cover portrayed an attractive seasonal scene. It was, however, regrettable that the organist who accompanied the entire evening so effectively, substituting for the orchestra in the Finzi and Rutter works, was not named.

I wonder whether the society has considered accompanying the Vaughan Williams with piano and solo cello, one of the alternatives suggested by the composer, but organ accompaniment is, of course, a perfectly acceptable option.

This was, in sum, a worthwhile and enjoyable concert with an appropriate seasonal flavour.

Richard Wade