

Serenade to Music

For their concert in Wells Cathedral on Saturday, the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society, under their conductor Matthew Owens, presented a programme devoted to the work of two English composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gerald Finzi.

The choir had a relatively light workload on this occasion since they were not required for two of the items.

The concert opened with one of Finzi's most loved works, *Dies Natalis* for tenor and orchestra. The La Folia Orchestra (formerly The Sarum Orchestra), performed the opening *Intrada* with sensitive phrasing and warmth of tone moving to an impassioned climax. For the remaining movements, the orchestra was joined by the tenor soloist, Ed Lyon. His style leans towards the declamatory rather than the lyrical (which is the usual way in which this piece is approached) and he made the most of the dynamic contrasts which presented themselves. His diction was clear and he displayed ample power in the upper reaches of his range where he produced some exciting sounds.

In "Rapture" the dancing mood was well caught by the orchestra and the soloist showed flexibility in rubato and dynamics. This contrasted with the next movement "Wonder", which was performed with sensitivity. This was an interesting and valid interpretation of the work and made a good overall impression.

Next came the other Finzi item, *In Terra Pax*. The orchestra set the scene for the first Christmas (including distant bells on the harp) which is followed by a setting of a poem by Robert Bridges framing St Luke's account of the Nativity and is sung by a baritone. The soloist was Darren Jeffrey who possesses a fine, rich toned voice with a bass like timbre in his lower reaches. The choral section was delivered with sensitivity the different voices blending well and displaying their usual high quality beauty of tone and good diction.

The Angel's interjection was provided by the competent soprano, Lesley-Jane Rogers. The section commencing "And suddenly there was a multitude..." with the chorus and orchestra exulting in the great news was quite overwhelming. This was a fine performance from all concerned.

The all Vaughan Williams' second half of the programme began with his *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*. The first section for solo cello was beautifully played by the orchestra's lead cellist with an atmospheric backing by the wordless chorus. The following sequence of carols was sung with great spirit by the baritone and chorus. There were some thrilling moments such as the closing lines of "O come ye merry gentlemen" and in the final chorus. The enlarged orchestra added to the impact of the performance.

Next came a complete contrast with the *Fantasia* on a theme of Thomas Tallis for strings. This received an urgent Interpretation yet with flexibility such that the more ethereal passages were poetically presented. This wonderful work was written with the acoustics of Gloucester Cathedral in mind and it sounded splendid in the open spaces of Wells.

The final work was the much loved *Serenade to Music*, written to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Sir Henry Wood's conducting debut. Originally conceived for 16 soloists who had worked with him, it was performed on this occasion in the composer's own arrangement for four soloists and chorus. Perhaps the chorus was somewhat large for this rather inti-mate piece but it nevertheless proved a reasonable substitute for the original line-up, the choral passages contrasting well with solos. The three soloists mentioned above, who were joined by mezzo-soprano Susan Spicer, and they acquitted themselves well.

If Lesley-Anne Rogers had too big a voice for the magical opening and closing phrases, she came into her own with the line beginning "How many things..." which she delivered to thrilling effect. The baritone also made a great impression with the very low lying passage "Is fit for stratagems..." The chorus and orchestra gave committed support and the piece brought the evening to a magical conclusion.

As usual, Matthew Owens guided his forces throughout with skill and interpretive sensitivity and he should be well satisfied with the final result. We look forward to the society's next offering which will be Britten's powerful *War Requiem*.

Brendan Sadler