

A CONCERT TO REMEMBER from the Choral Society

The Minster Church was filled to capacity on Saturday, 10th November, as the Mayor and members of the Royal British Legion joined the audience for a concert to mark the 100th anniversary of the Armistice. Around the walls were biographies of the Axminster men who had given their lives in active service. This was to be an evening of serious music. The programme was devoted to Vaughan Williams, three compositions with markedly different styles. The titles of *Six Songs to be sung in times of war*, published in 1940 when the Battle of Britain was raging, reflected the need for solidarity and hope: Courage, Liberty, Healing, Victory, Peace and New Age, interpreted in confident, unison songs for choir and orchestra. The restricted tonal range inherent in unison compositions made exacting demands on the choir which they mastered with confidence and restraint, blending voices with sensitivity. The subjects were treated with varying combinations of voices, Liberty given to tenors and basses, Healing to sopranos and altos. In other songs, men's and women's voices intertwined, often alternating and returning to unison at the end. There were some lovely touches: a sudden *pianissimo* by the men in A Song of Liberty; a glorious rise in tone and volume for Victory. After completing the whole song cycle, the choir sat down, the audience relaxed, and a young man with a violin took centre stage. Nathan Broomhead is a professional violinist and an academic mathematician. His rendering of *The Lark Ascending* (1914) held the audience's rapt attention – pure joy.

The main work of the concert was *Dona Nobis Pacem*, written in 1936 with memories of 1914 still vivid and the rumblings of rearmament audible from Hitler's Germany. This outpouring of disturbing music is far from the 'stand up and fight' voice of the *Six Songs*. From the rostrum, before picking up her conductor's baton, Judy Martin encouraged the audience to read and listen to the words of the Walt Whitman poems which so influenced this music. A soprano solo sets the scene with a plaintive *Agnus dei*, backed by percussion and brass, muffled and ominous. The words *Dona nobis pacem* (Grant us peace) are repeated, as they will be again and again throughout the work. The chorus is the crowd, loud and harsh, crying 'Beat the drums' and 'Blow the bugles', assaulting our ears with the cacophony of war. The discipline of the choir was exemplary, responding to the demands of the score and the guiding baton of the conductor. The baritone soloist took his place in the pulpit, and with choral support quietly ponders the realities of war: 'For my enemy is dead ...'. The refrain of *Dona nobis pacem* and drums provide a chilling closing phrase. The final Whitman poem is a dirge for two veterans, father and son, buried in the same grave. The chorus sings in unison to underline the gravity, drums pound a dead march, and a single bugle call sounds over the grave. There is no resolution in the music, no comfort of a chord coming to rest in the home key. The remainder of the text comprises mainly words from various books of the Bible in which there is no respite from mourning. The orchestra introduces the final movement, 'Nation shall not lift up a sword', tenors and basses opening the chorus with soprano and altos joining them. Percussion raises the volume, loud clashes and drums marking the affirmation of 'new heavens and new earth'. On Saturday evening, 'Glory to God and goodwill toward men' resounded from the rafters of the Minster, and yet, at the final quiet passage, the soprano's clear plea for peace dominated. *Dona nobis pacem* soared above the orchestra and, taken up by the chorus, brought this marathon programme to an end with barely audible repetitions of '*pacem*'. The audience remained silent, the conductor's baton was lowered and slowly the applause grew into a wave of emotional appreciation for an outstanding performance. Well deserved ovations were given to soloists Harriet Mountford and Julian Rippon, violinist Nathan Broomhead, conductors Peter Parshall and Judy Martin, the orchestra and our own Axminster Choral Society. It was indeed a concert and a message never to be forgotten.

Sydie Bones.