

## Faure's Requiem and works by Bach, Haydn and Mozart.

To mark the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Axminster and District Choral Society, the committee looked back at the programmes presented in its early years and from them chose the works for their spring concert. Most, but not all, were familiar to choral singers and audience alike, and how fortunate we were that the main work chosen was Gabriel Fauré's Requiem, a perennial favourite. The Society dedicated this performance of the Requiem to the memory of Mrs Mary Pearce, a soprano who sang with them for many years. First came a group of sacred choruses from the 18th century, written by giants of the musical world – Bach, Haydn and Mozart. Haydn's motet *Insanae et vanae curae* opened the programme; originally composed as part of the oratorio *Il Ritorno di Tobia*, this setting to a new text was reworked for concert performance.

The vigorous interpretation of 'mad fury' provided a rousing curtain-raiser, the chorus excelling in dynamic variation somewhat reminiscent of *The Creation*, especially in the serene centre section asking man why does he struggle. If Haydn's motet was unfamiliar, the same cannot be said of Bach's *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring* which followed. Here the small orchestra came into its own, strings and organ alternating with the choir in a stream of beautiful music, slow but ever moving.

A change of mood followed. The familiar opening bars to *Ave Verum Corpus* set the devotional tone of this Mozart classic, which was maintained seamlessly by disciplined and expressive singing. The audience hardly dared break the spell after the final notes of the closing bars. Horns joined the orchestra for the Bach motet, *O Jesu Christ meus lebens licht*, adding texture to the introductory and closing sections, and supporting the sustained and difficult phrases demanded of the singers. The tempo then quickened noticeably for Haydn's *Te Deum* for the Empress Marie Therese. The programme notes included a quotation by James Webster that describes it as: 'an ABA construction of great power and terseness: it whirls through the very long text in little more than eight minutes, while still finding time for a double fugue and a climax at the end'.

And so it did whirl along, choir watching the conductor's baton with great attention, achieving unanimous dramatic pauses as well as swelling crescendos. A splendid first half.

As Judy raised her baton at the start of the Fauré, a frisson of anticipation swept through the audience. This unique work, written a century later than those in the first half of the programme, reflects its place and time in musical history – devotional in structure, romantic in expression, and uniquely French. The choir rose to the occasion, and to Judy's expectation of them. The opening words were hushed, the shading from very soft to very loud within the first phrase was impressive as were the dynamics throughout the Mass. Tenors must be congratulated for their part; few in number they nevertheless sang with effortless delivery.

Especially notable in the exposed unaccompanied sections with the altos in the *Offertoire*, *O Domine, Jesu Christe*. Baritone and choir member, Cam Bowie, gave full justice to the lovely solo within the *Offertoire* which was sung with gravity and with feeling. Special mention must also be given to the soaring *Amen* from the altos which was truly uplifting. The performance just got better and better. Sopranos sounded like choristers – essential for the delicacy of this Requiem. In the *Sanctus* where sopranos and male voices alternate, the effect was superb, heavenly and earthly choirs in company. Marjie Dorling, soprano soloist in the *Pie Jesu*, also a member of the choir, gave an exquisite rendering of this lyrical masterpiece, her crystal-clear tone perfect for sacred music. This high standard of singing and accompaniment was sustained to the very last notes of the *In Paradisum*, the whole work closing with violins playing so quietly that we held our breath to listen. Accolades and congratulations are to be given to all singers and instrumentalists, especially soloists Cam Bowie and Marjie Dorling, and organist Peter Parshall. Words are not adequate for praise for the indefatigable and inspirational Judy Martin: music flows from her whole body, encompassing all the performers and motivating them to give of their best. And that they all did. I hope they were aware of how much pleasure they had given the audience by this memorable evening of music. Sydie Bones.