

## Axminster Choral Society Present Sacred Music in the Minster

The reputation of Axminster Choral Society attracted a large audience to the Minster on 16<sup>th</sup> November, eager to listen to an evening of sacred music by Elgar and Puccini. Opening the programme was Elgar's setting of Psalm 29, *Give Unto The Lord*, written for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a Christian charity and first performed in St. Paul's Cathedral in April 1914. Unfamiliar with this work, I relaxed in my pew, thinking of Elgar's contemplative sacred music such as *Praise to the holiest* in *Gerontius*. The 75-strong choir rose to their feet, members of the orchestra picked up their instruments, and charismatic conductor Judy Martin lifted her baton. The triple *forte* opening supplication soon dispelled any idea of relaxation – this proved to be a powerful version of the psalm, given dramatic weight by all performers. Choir and orchestra responded magnificently to Elgar's interpretation of the text, offering voice, brass and percussion to this God of might and thunder. The final sentence, *The Lord shall give His people the blessing of peace*, was particularly moving, knowing as we do today, that war would shatter the peace of Europe before the end of the year. *Sospiri (Sighs)*, which followed, changed the mood completely. First performed in August 1914, this adagio for strings and organ, written for Elgar's close friend and later biographer, the violinist Billy Reed, set a sombre tone. Exquisitely played, quiet and plaintive, the music seems to anticipate the sorrow that was to follow.

The final work in this concert, Puccini's *Messa di Gloria*, transported us back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to 1876, when Puccini aged 18 was at music college in Lucca, where he wrote this Mass as his graduation thesis. His intention was to demonstrate the traditions of sacred music - classic structure, varied musical form and comprehensive use of all voices in the chorus. Filed away and forgotten while Puccini concentrated on opera, the score did not see the light of day again until 1951; after it was performed the following year it soon became a choral favourite. We were ready for a change of mood. A rustle in the back row of the choir indicated that the two keyboard players, Peter Lea-Cox and Peter Parshall, were joining the basses, two handsome young soloists took their seats, and once more all eyes were on the conductor's baton. A short orchestral introduction led into the *Kyrie* which set the choir a challenging opening movement, covering a wide tonal range with exposed entries for all voices and a variety of rhythm and dynamics, setting the standard for the remainder of this Mass. Many of the movements commenced without orchestral introduction, the *Credo* being the first. Unfazed, the choir hit middle C *ff* and set off confidently in perfect unison – most impressive. The centre section, *Et incarnatus est*, was remarkable, with a change of key and tempo, highlighting the solo tenor line soaring above the choir and closing on a memorable *et homo factus est*. A dramatic bass solo depicts the crucifixion before the chorus takes over for the rest of the movement. The orchestration of the *Credo* adds a great deal to the atmosphere, and the instrumentalists responded magnificently, brass and drums hailing the expectation of eternal life. The *Sanctus* once more required the choir to find their entrance notes without help from the orchestra and once again there was no hesitation. Puccini's youthful exuberance came to the fore in the closing movements, demanding expertise and concentration from all performers. Bass and tenor solo parts were scored for both the *Benedictus* and the *Agnus Dei*, separately and combined, which was a real pleasure. The *Gloria* had been programmed as the finale, and what a good choice that was. The two soloists sang superbly, always audible above choir and orchestra, with exceptional diction. Judy Martin's precision and encouragement

brought out the very best in the choir, sopranos sailing with ease to the top of their register, even for prolonged notes. Puccini was beginning to show signs of his operatic future: the repeated phrase of *Gloria, gloria in excelsis Deo* danced along with a memorable melody, and the soprano line in *Qui tollis* was as lyrical as any aria. The fugue setting of *Cum sancto spiritu* was the firing gun for the closing lap. This was remarkably restrained in spite of the speed, never allowed to run away with its own momentum. The soloists joined the chorus for the closing phrases as the tempo accelerated relentlessly. It was breathtakingly exciting. Amazingly, all participants reached the finishing line at the identical moment – soloists, choir and orchestra. Judy lowered her baton, the choir relaxed and instruments were rested. They all deserved the prolonged applause – it had been a marathon performance.

Special tribute must be made to the two soloists, Magnus Walker, tenor, and Charles Cunliffe, bass-baritone; to Peter Parshall, director of music for the Axminster Choral Society; and to Judy Martin, associate music director and ever popular conductor.