

A Georgian Christmas Carol Concert at the Minster

This year the Axminster and District Choral Society decided to celebrate Christmas as it might have been 200 years ago, when amateur gallery choirs and instrumentalists provided the music in most country churches. This was a brilliant idea, and it led to a fascinating and memorable concert.

The Minster was decorated with a veritable forest of Christmas trees, both real and plastic, and the singers were to varying degrees dressed in mid-18th century clothing, with many pretty white bonnets on display. The small band of instrumentalists added seasonal colour with their red and white spotted neckerchiefs.

Very informative programme notes gave an excellent potted history of church music-making in Georgian times, further amplified during the concert by two readings from Thomas Hardy's only truly humorous novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

The music was researched and chosen by members of the West Gallery Music Association, plus Jennifer Royle at the Devon Heritage Centre. The band of instrumentalists consisted of a very Hardy-esque mix of 5 strings, a couple of flutes, one clarinet, one horn and a euphonium, all assembled under the title of the Pottlers, and trained by Peter Lea-Cox (of Pottlelake). Peter was also responsible for arranging all the music for the band and choir - a mammoth task brilliantly accomplished. The ADCS's Director, Peter Parshall, conducted skillfully and also succeeded in good-humouredly training the entire audience to sing two familiar carols to unfamiliar 18th century music. The two audience-participation items were amongst the most enjoyable moments of the evening. What fun it was to sing *God rest ye merry Gentleman* to a rollicking 18th century version of the tune, even better perhaps than its later Victorian adaptation. And who would of thought that *While Shepherds watched* fits perfectly to the Yorkshire folk song *On Ilkley Moor bar t'at*?

The pattern of the concert was to have three or more carols sung in a single stretch by the choir, and then either a reading or solo. Each rather lengthy carol must have been hard work for the choir, with so many unfamiliar words to read. The audience certainly appreciated having the words printed in their programmes. It might have been even more enjoyable (for both choir and audience) to have had a few less carols and more intermissions of readings and solos. More audience participation would also have been welcome.

It is always an invidious task for reviewers to decide who to mention individually, especially when every single one of the performers so obviously gave their all to make this such a joyful occasion. The readers Rozanne Bulmer and Graham Cumming did a great job in conveying just the right atmosphere without over-dramatisation. There were some excellent short solos, of which *This is the Truth* sent from above, sung most beautifully by Peter Parshall, deserves special praise. And in the band it was so good to see persons of mature years either coming back to instruments long ago put away, or even playing in public for the first time with newly acquired talents!

Richard Godfrey.