

## HAYDN THE SEASONS

In a review written for *The Gramophone*, Richard Wigmore noted that Haydn claimed that 'his exertions on *The Seasons* had undermined his health'. Composed between 1798/01, towards the end of his life, it is indeed a marathon. He found the text awkward and dismissed much of the pastoral vocabulary as 'Frenchified trash'. However, this secular oratorio is a masterpiece of descriptive composition and Axminster Choral Society's performance on 6<sup>th</sup> April at The Minster marked another high point in their long history. The work is in oratorio form, written for three solo voices, chorus and orchestra. Of these, the soloists and orchestra were performing all or much of the time, whereas the choir had the luxury of the occasional rest. The three separated chords at the beginning reminded me of the overture to *The Magic Flute* (1791) and I was interested to read in the programme notes that Haydn and Mozart were both members of the same Masonic lodge. This was to be an evening of musical surprises.

Most oratorios open with a chorus – not this Spring. A recitative from the three soloists had to bid farewell to winter before the choir could stand to greet 'gentle Spring' which they did with lyrical expertise and attention to detail. The trio and chorus that weaved its way to the end of Spring was in turn both light and majestic, with a fugue as a final flourish. Summer also commenced with a recitative, setting the scene for the depiction of one day, from sunrise to midday heat, evening storm to stars at night. Rhythm changed to triple time, horns led the country style music, chorus joined the soloists and dynamics rose to *fff* before the choir were granted a rest. Haydn's orchestration of this movement is awe-inspiring, elegant continuo, flowing strings, delightful phrases from individual wind instruments, pizzicato raindrops and drumrolls of thunder. Soloists and choir brought this idyllic summer day to a close, ready to welcome 'gentle sleep'.

One would expect that autumn and winter would turn mellow and more subdued. Not a bit of it – the second half of this concert was a romp. Autumnal harvest was followed by youthful shenanigans in the orchard, rounded off with a climax of success in the hunt, all expressed with an amazing variety of musical techniques, the soloists and orchestra outstanding in their skill and versatility. The choir mustered their full forces for the hunt, their Tally Ho and Hurrah well capable of matching the resounding merry horn. Special mention must be made of the tenors, few in number but valiant in performance. Although Winter started with a fog-laden fugue and a beautifully sung languid Cavatina from the soprano, it soon brightened into the rhythms of work and firelit evenings of song. The song (not aria!) A Wealthy Lord was one of the highlights of the evening, soprano singing the verses with the choir on their toes to provide the choruses in traditional hostelry style. The finale of the year turns to contemplation in which Haydn draws comparisons between a year and a life. Heralded by horns and woodwind, the choir gave a superb rendering of this hymn of triumph, with soloists interweaving their voices or soaring above the ranks of singers in front of them.

Any praise I can give is inadequate for the musicians behind and in front of this exhilarating performance. Accolades must go to Peter Parshall who trains the choir, Judy Martin whose conducting brings out the very best from all performers, Peter Lea-Cox as Continuo, the tireless professionals in the orchestra and all members of the Choral Society. But for this programme, highest praise must go to the three soloists, Harriet Mountford (soprano), James Atherton (tenor) and Charles Cunniffe (bass), whose response to the huge demands made on them by this work was magnificent. Congratulations to all of you.