

## The Choral Society's Musical Miscellany

Doncaster Choral Society's Summer Concert, at Priory (13 June), did not comprise one major work but, to quote W.S. Gilbert, was "a thing of shreds and patches", a highly effective and most enjoyable Musical Miscellany. Nearly all the music was British, the one exception being Haydn's stirring, late (1800) and quite concise *Te Deum in C* which often sounds like *The Creation*, composed two years before. This was a crisp, authoritative reading under Alan East's baton. A sterner test for the Society was the trio of unaccompanied Latin motets Opus 38 by Charles Villiers Stanford. The first two, *Justorum animae* and *Beati quorum via*, were a change from the rousing, joyful nature of practically all the rest of their programme, not that either is tragic; but the intricate eight part *Coelos ascendit hodie*, with its jubilant antiphonal writing, returned to the extrovert general character of the evening, albeit more complex than all the rest and brought a highly creditable response from the singers.

Two pieces composed for Coronations completed the Society's part in the programme. *I Was Glad*, written for Edward VII in 1902 and revised at the three Coronations since, shows Parry's grand manner at its best. I was surprised, in view of the fact that this was the Queen's official birthday, that the opportunity was not taken to add the Vivat's; but this was nevertheless a rousing rendition. So was Handel's *The King Shall Rejoice*, so different from Parry's sustained majestic span, in that it is one of the finest examples we have of Handel's choral part-writing. I find it almost unbelievable that *Zadok the Priest*, fine though it is and also composed for the Coronation of 1727, is almost invariably preferred to it. How splendid that we did hear it, as a further celebration of the Queen's birthday, and sung with memorable joy and precision. Accompaniments for this, and the Parry and Haydn, were supplied on the Priory organ by Jonathon Gooing, who contributed much to the performances with his admirably secure and ebulliently registered work.

Margaret McDonald, who is for my money this country's best alto, particularly since the retirement of Janet Baker, has had a happy association with the Society over a period of some twenty years, she was once again on great form, although it was perhaps a pity that no suitable piece could be found which she could sing with the choir as a soloist. Instead we had a series of offerings drawing on the rich heritage of English solo song. She began with Powell, the hauntingly lovely *Music For A While* and the mock (or perhaps not so mock) Scottish folk song '*Twas Within a Mile of Edinburgh Town*, whose almost incontinent Scotch snap rhythm suggested a not quite folky complexity, and Handel's *Where e'er you walk*, which, she told us she sang as a child, though she would probably not have decorated the da capo so tastefully. For her next contribution she put together a cycle (or maybe "sequence" would be a more appropriate term) of four late songs by Vaughan Williams drawn from two projected cycles (or sequences) and described as *Four Last Songs*. Great song composers often keep their best until last (Richard Strauss and maybe Brahms come immediately to mind) and these four gems, grateful to the voice and here sensitively projected with outstandingly good diction, suggested that V.W. was of their number. Certainly the songs worked well as a sequence and should be more often heard.

And finally to Elgar's *Sea Pictures*, 110 years old this year. With, as here, just a piano accompaniment available, it is inevitable that a listener loses something – Elgar was after all one of the greatest orchestrators in musical history. Particularly was this the case with the last song *The Swimmer*, which has the characteristic Elgar surge, swagger almost. This is not a criticism of the composer, whose piano writing has often been criticised, and not always fairly, nor of Mr. East, who was a sensitive and supportive accompanist to Miss McDonald throughout. Indeed there were compensating advantages and, again taking *The Swimmer* as my example, we could hear all the words which we rarely can against the weight of an orchestra. There were other delights, particularly the intelligent phrasing of the popular *Where Corals Lie* and the glowing warmth of *Sabbath Morning at Sea*, incidentally the best poem of the five and the best of the five (admittedly rather undistinguished) poets. This was one of the most rewarding interpretations of the cycle (? sequence) I have heard; this artiste performed it in Doncaster with orchestra

and I look forward to hearing her do so again, which is not to say she cannot do much for Elgar's (often regarded with something approaching contempt) other songs with piano accompaniments.

ORPHEUS