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Fine interpretation of Brahms' Requiem

THE key to Brahms's Requiem, given by the Newbury Choral Society at its spring concert in the Corn Exchange on Saturday, is surely found in the anguish of the composer's setting of "Behold, all flesh is grass, and the glory of man is as the flower of the field," and "Thou hast made my days as a handbreadth before thee and my lifetime is as nothing to thee."

It is the fear and horror of the extinguishing of life that is the mainspring of this tremendous work. And even in the passages that speak of hope and reconciliation hereafter one feels the undercurrent of a wistful longing, rather than of assurance, that these things shall be.

All this was superbly brought out in the society's performance under Mr. John Russell. This was above all a masterly interpretation of the work: consistently worked out, prepared and rehearsed with immense care. The Brahmsian anguish was never allowed to relax its grip: and the chorus was splendidly responsive to its conductor. I doubt whether it has given a better performance in recent years.

Equally impressive was the balance held, in this notoriously difficult hall, between singers and the young professional orchestra. For once the orchestral forces did not swamp the singers: even when the full power was unleashed in 'O death where is thy victory?'

It is not a work that gives a dazzle of scope to its two soloists. But Mr. Russell had seen to it that in Eileen Poulter (soprano) and John Heddle Nash (bass) he had the authority and command that the work requires.

The programme was opened by an admirable performance of Vaughan Williams's Benedicite. All the qualities that were a feature of the performance of the main work were foreshadowed here. Perfect blending of orchestral and choral sound: the quiet central section very delicately phrased and projected: and the superb floating soprano of Eileen Poulter dominating all.

This was indeed a moving and musically impressive occasion. One was left with a sense that those are works very much after the conductor's own heart, and that we were sharing something of his commitment to them. It is pleasing to add that the hall was very nearly full, and that the audience's pleasure must have communicated itself to all who took part.

W.R.B.