

Dec 7th 1948.

English choral music at the Corn Exchange

NEWBURY Choral Society gave a well planned programme of contrasting choral music by English composers on Saturday evening. It included songs by Parry and Stanford and also an outstanding performance of William Walton's "Belshazzar's Feast."

The programme was well constructed showing how English choral music developed from the traditional styles of Parry and Stanford — often described as leaders of the English musical renaissance — to the exciting modern style of the Walton oratorio which was first performed in 1931. It has been said that Walton's work gives the impression of having been created with effort — similar effort is needed in interpretation. Both choir and orchestra achieved success with obvious enjoyment even after the inevitable and arduous series of background rehearsals.

The concert was not without last minute difficulties. Only as the final rehearsal on the Saturday afternoon was it discovered that the baritone soloist for "Belshazzar's Feast" did not include Stanford's Songs of the Fleet in his repertoire.

Fortunately two young soloists, Jonathan Coad and Raouf Zaidan, brought in as guests "to stiffen the choir" came to the rescue. They learnt the solo parts of two of the songs a mere hour or so before the actual performance and fully deserved the warm applause they received for a most creditable effort.

Understandably they did not open out into full voice after so little rehearsal but both clearly showed underlying quality and skill.

Even so the choir obviously felt apprehensive. There were occasional wavering entries and Gillian Lovett deserves especial praise for maintaining precision of timing in the deceptively simple "Song of Farewell" by Parry. The choir returned to its normal confidence when embarked on the main work of the evening — the "Belshazzar's Feast."

John Russell gave a moving interpretation of "Belshazzar's Feast," concentrating on bringing out its musical quality as opposed to over emphasis on its operatic drama. The opening section conveyed in musical terms the sad despair of an exiled people as opposed to the "howling" anguish portrayed in other interpretations. The description of "Babylon the Great City" came over beautifully with the rich mature voice of the solist John Gibbs. The wild rhythms of the pagan feast itself were well brought out by the orchestra and the percussion section gave a superb interpretation of the sinister writing on the wall.

Criticism is always possible and three positive comments may be helpful. First, tightening up discipline in the choir might come from improved arrangement.

Shorter members towards the back were hidden and could not see the conductor. Secondly, although rehearsal time must have been at a premium a longer programme would have been appreciated. Thirdly, as the programme had obviously been carefully thought out could the programme notes have been more comprehensive? Perhaps an article in the *Newbury Weekly News* published before the event

might have tempted a larger audience to an ambitious programme.

Newbury Choral Society has had many successes and this concert was up to standard. It is sad that the next concert will be the last conducted by John Russell. He inspires confidence, has a leading position in the interpretation of choral music and brings in so many young musicians to final performances. Newbury will owe him an especial debt of gratitude.

J. M. PAYNE