

Britten piece highlight of choral concert

ON Saturday Newbury Choral Society, under its conductor Clive Fairbairn, gave a concert for St. Cecilia's Day in St. Nicolas' Church.

First in the programme was a setting of an ode to St. Cecilia by John Blow, written in 1684. This was performed by the chorus, accompanied by the strings of the Sinfonia Concertante and Trevor Selby on the organ. Soloists were Linda Darnell, soprano, David James, counter-tenor, Richard Brabrooke, tenor, and Alistair Boobyer, bass. In this work I felt the solo parts lacked conviction to all except a specialist audience, especially in the use of a counter-tenor, and it was left to the chorus to bring their sections to life.

The third work was Handel's setting of Dryden's 'Ode to St. Cecilia.' Here the addition of percussion by Neil Streeter, and excellent trumpet and flute solo work in addition to strings, woodwind and organ, gave impact and direction to what I feel is basically rather pedestrian writing by Handel. The voice of the soprano, Linda Darnell, really came into its own in this music and showed itself especially suited in timbre and volume to the contrapuntal style.

The middle work was for me the highlight of the evening — Benjamin Britten's setting of W. H. Auden's 'Hymn to St. Cecilia.' The poet's words are strange and difficult, as is Britten's music, but there is never dissonance for its own sake, and in this work the few lines sung by soprano and counter-tenor against the chorus have a strange, ethereal quality which made me want to hear them repeated.

The use of organ in what was written as an unaccompanied work was, to me, entirely justified by the effect made by a choir larger than the one envisaged by the composer. The thrice-repeated chorus was a thrilling sound heard at its most glorious in the setting of St. Nicolas' Church.

It is to be hoped that more local people will take advantage of the next concert in the church, when some of the same musicians will be joining in a concert for St. Nicolas' Day on December 6.

M.M.B.