

Pageant and repose

NEWBURY CHORAL SOCIETY
at St. Nicolas Church, Newbury

AN irresistible wave of delight broke over the audience at the beginning of the Newbury Choral Society's concert on Saturday. Hubert Parry's coronation anthem 'I was glad', pure, lithe and flowing, rather than wilfully accented, was a perfectly conceived expression of joy. Commendably, conductor Jonathan Finney intently explored the rich dynamic body of the piece rather than merely exploiting its winning harmonies.

The Newbury Wind Octet continued the theme of royal recognition with the overture to Mozart's 'Idomeneo', played with sleek and well-honed precision. Arrangements of four arias from 'Cosi fan tutte' proved the resonant sparkle of the oboes, the cunning interplay between horns and bassoons, and the melting poetry of the clarinets. Most memorable was the naive yet provocative 'Una donna quindici anni', played at a notably languorous tempo. The final 'Fortuntato l'uom' was delightful, but all too brief.

If festival and theatre were the keynotes of the first half, then introspection was instilled by the chilling opening bars of Bruckner's Mass in E Minor. Embracing sources as diverse as Gregorian chant and Gounod, Palestrina and Wagner, this personal and intimate work elicited an unwavering commitment from Finney and his singers.

Its unconventional orchestration of woodwind and brass blended awkwardly with the expressive role of the choir, and tempi and dynamics, especially among the brass, were rarely responsive enough. Yet in the grim warmth which supplanted desolation and blazed to a fiery and affirmative conclusion in the Kyrie, there was an irrepressible force.

The Gloria displayed more vocal muscle, but less authority. Its delicate, pealing 'Amen' limped before being retrieved exultantly. Light and shade defined the alternately angelic and dour Credo, which boasted a splendidly dramatic 'Resurrexit' and an expressive denouement.

Following a touchingly light and feeling Sanctus, the Benedictus was plaintive, but, lacking a pulse, became rather forlorn. Happily, the concluding Agnus Dei balanced energy and expression, ending in characteristic self-effacement and quiet affirmation.

The choir's efforts were splendidly vindicated, and Finney is to be praised for his sympathetic ability to capture and condense moments of repose and power, and to recreate the subtleties of one of the most suggestive and intense choral works of the 19th century.

DAVID FELTON