

Setting the scene

NEWBURY CHORAL SOCIETY
at the Corn Exchange

Dec. '94

CHRISTMAS is for singing carols, and by the end of Newbury Choral Society's annual carol concert given last Saturday evening in the Corn Exchange, under its conductor Robert Barsby, there was almost a surfeit.

The choir began with Britten's 'Ceremony of Carols'. The opening and closing antiphons should represent the approach and departure of the choir, but here they were performed as a solid choral frame giving the work a curious imbalance. The harp interlude (played by Julia Thornton) should lead chillingly into the 'Winter Night' carol, but the spell was broken by intrusive applause. Both 'Wolcum Yole' and 'Deo Gratias' lacked force, but the triple canon in 'This Little Babe' was caught well enough. Janet Coxwell's lovely voice control was shown to best effect in the Spring Carol.

In Vaughan Williams' 'Fantasia on Christmas Carols' the choir seemed more at home, although here the baritone soloist Jonathan Finney seemed less so. His opening of 'This is the Truth' sat uneasily in his register. He in turn was splendid in Finzi's 'In Terra Pax'. This music, beautifully supported by the strings of the London Concertante, was inspired by hearing church bells ring in the New Year while out walking with Vaughan Williams.

The West Gallery carols in the second half proved a useful foil to these 'high-brow' settings (the conductor's words). Their origins lie in untutored country traditions of the 18th century, mixing rustic oompah with naive simplicity. They were enjoyably sung, if somewhat repetitive. In the main-stream carols full audience participation was demanded and given, with an especially pleasing version of 'The Little Road to Bethlehem' by Michael Head from the choir. In a rather boisterous setting of 'Jingle Bells' the brass of the West Berkshire Music Centre had fun diverting into Prokofiev.

Such occasions are always enjoyed, and this one helped to set the scene for Christmas. I have heard the Choral Society sing better, but it was still an evening to share.

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