

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA WITH E.C.S.

On June 23rd Eastbourne Choral Society donned party frocks (not the tenors and basses, of course) to present an evening of operatic excerpts at Eastbourne's Town Hall. Their conductor, John Hancorn, is himself well-known as an operatic baritone; and he came up with a balanced menu of choruses, solos and duets to delight lovers of fine singing. In opera, the vocal demands are such that professional soloists are *de rigueur*, and tenor Andrew Mackenzie-Wicks was joined by soprano Ruth Kerr and full chorus to open the show with the drinking song that begins Verdi's *Traviata*. Little doubt was left that we were in for several treats.

One followed immediately. Ruth, stunning in flaming red with a rose in her dark hair, easily moved down to the mezzo register to threaten Don José's sanity in the *Habanera* from Bizet's *Carmen*. Delight followed delight after that: the men of the choir brought us back to our senses with the *Priests' Chorus* from Mozart's *Magic Flute* before Andrew poured out his love for a girl in a picture, from the same opera. This tenor-taxing aria showed him to be in great voice: rapturous and sweet at the same time. Ruth then found herself pursued by the conductor (in the role of Don Giovanni) in one of Mozart's sexiest duets, *La ci darem*. This Kerr-Hancorn performance was beautifully judged: well sung, of course; but exceptionally well acted too. The spicy duet needs, and received, a sensitive, almost balletic control, or it can, and often does, degenerate into a ridiculous grope. They got it exactly right.

Ruth was called upon to play many roles in this one evening. As Purcell's *Dido* she brought tears to the eyes as she sang *When I am laid in Earth*, darkening her voice so well that I did wonder if she was, in reality, a deep mezzo rather than a soprano; but in Rusalka's *Song to the Moon* (Dvorak) and the Easter Hymn from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* she was back in the stratosphere. I hope we shall have an opportunity to hear her again soon.

The biggest burst of applause was for that smash-hit duet for tenor and baritone in Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*. It has an element of danger, especially for the tenor, which ensures enthusiasm when the performance gets everything spot-on. With John Hancorn singing again and Andrew Mackenzie-Wicks hitting the tenorial high notes with power and confidence, the Town Hall audience went wild. I agreed.

It's easy to praise good soloists; but without fine pianists (in the absence of an orchestra) and a disciplined, able choir the solo efforts will count for little. On this occasion everything was fine. The choir was enchanting on demand in the Peasant Chorus from *Onegin*, and passionately committed in the Polovtsian Dances from *Igor*. Accompaniments were shared between Peter Burge and Carole Kelly, on an electronic keyboard. They never failed to support and complement the singers. A smashing evening out!

- ROBIN GREGORY