

EASTBOURNE CHORAL IN GREAT VOICE --- and A TOUR DE FORCE (pun intended)

ROBIN GREGORY reports

Of late, so much great music has filled All Saints Church in Carlisle Road that music-lovers will soon be seeking holiday properties nearby. It was there, on Saturday 28th November, that John Hancorn conducted the ECS in an evening of English Anthems and Songs, in the presence of the Mayor. The event will long be remembered by all those present.

Eastbourne Choral is now a big choir: over eighty singers, all beautifully turned-out and well-disciplined. Handel's four Coronation Anthems demand power and confidence: and from the first notes of *Zadok the Priest* it was clear that we were in safe hands. No orchestra on this occasion, but the church's fine Harrison & Harrison organ rocked the rafters while remaining under the expert control of David Force. He was, indeed, one of the stars of the show, accompanying every item, and, when required, moving to the electronic keyboard which, in his hands, became a piano. His own solo-spot (a little-known but magical Voluntary by Peter Prelleur) brought well-deserved applause.

Handel's genius is undeniable; but in a masterful piece of programme-planning his four Anthems were by no means the only delights offered that evening. Vaughan Williams's *O Taste and See* for unaccompanied choir was composed for our own Queen's coronation. Beautifully sung, this exquisite work gave an opportunity for Shirlene Billenness to demonstrate that there are some worthy soloists lurking in the ranks. Another un-named soprano shone in John Ireland's majestic *Greater Love hath No Man*, for me a masterpiece deserving of more frequent exposure. Ireland spent the last years of his life in a converted Sussex windmill, and was buried at St Mary the Virgin church, Shipley, West Sussex.

Unbroken choral singing, no matter how brilliant, is best set against some gentle contrast. Enter Welsh soprano Catrin Woodruff, a singer who, we discovered, combines beauty of sound with power and a concern for words. She gave us songs by Rebecca Clarke, Muriel Herbert, Liza Lehmann, Roger Quilter and Ivor Novello. It was a real pleasure to hear singing of such quality, with exquisite pianissimos on some of the high notes, and passion in the words. If she can acquire the confidence to discard her score she will undoubtedly become a recitalist of distinction. Quilter's *Love's Philosophy*, a setting of a poem by Shelley, was especially on-target; and even Ivor Novello's popular *We'll gather lilacs* sparkled. I am still waiting, though, to hear a singer confident enough to drop that ridiculous final "S": one gathers lilac, not lilacs!

Congratulations to all concerned, not only for an evening of fine music-making, but for a written programme that was informative and well set-out, and for interval drinks that were dispensed with a smile and with wine at the right temperature.