

By the Seaside: "Music for a Summer's Evening"
Review by Robin Gregory

Eastbourne Choral Society's skilfully chosen programme for their concert at All Saints' Church on July 8th 2017 had about it the scent of the sea. It proved to be an almost unbroken evening of tuneful song.

The opening work, which many of us were hearing for the first time, showed the singers and their conductor John Hancorn in fine fettle. Eleven English folksongs had been collected by John Rutter into a cycle lasting about 28 minutes entitled "The Sprig of Thyme". The title-song and "I know where I'm going" introduced the evening's star soprano, Yvonne Patrick, who certainly gave the lie to the common assumption that all good sopranos are portly. Slim and elegantly dressed, she knew precisely how to bring an audience into her musical world, never needing to use a score, and throughout giving the words her full attention. I hope we shall see more of her in future concerts. Some settings were for female choir only ("Can ye sew cushions?"); others for men only ("The Miller of Dee"). All enjoyed the superb piano accompaniment of Nick Houghton. The choir relished the chance to show off their balanced singing. If I had to find one teeny reservation it would be that the final song ("Afton Water") might have gained from a more lingering tempo.

Yvonne then sang three Shakespeare songs. From "Measure for Measure" we heard music by Roger Quilter, one of England's finest songwriters, who was born in Brighton. In this, as in the songs from "Hamlet" by Elisabeth Maconchy and "The Tempest" by Arthur Sullivan, pianist Nick Houghton again provided brilliant support.

Conductor John Hancorn changed roles in order to sing Butterworth's heartbreaking song "Is my Team Ploughing?" This dialogue between a dead man and a living friend is often assumed, even in TV documentaries, to have been a response to the slaughter of The Great War of 1914-18. In fact it sets a poem by AE Housman which was published in 1896, though Butterworth was indeed killed in the War. It demands two distinct voices, and a real understanding not only of the words, but of their implications. John's performance was perfect. He then changed his hat again, to accompany one of his baritone pupils, Lars, who sang three of Vaughan Williams's settings of Robert Louis Stevenson's "Songs of Travel". Undoubtedly Lars has a promising voice, but did he really need the printed score, the handling of which tended to separate him from his audience?

We were certainly near the sea in Sussex for the rest of the first half. Yvonne sang impeccably "The Singer", by Michael Head, who was born in Eastbourne in 1900, and then Parry's setting of Christina Rossetti's "My heart is like a singing bird". Parry was born in Bournemouth, but died in Rustington.

Part Two was devoted to the musical stage. From "Gondoliers" by G&S, the choir gave a rousing "Cachucha", every word audible. Then we were in the world of the Stage Musical. Some items were so musically satisfying that they could be lifted from stage to a choral concert and still retain their attraction. Others suffered from having fame based more on the actual staging than on musical quality. Yvonne's performance of "Bill" from "Show Boat" worked wonderfully, not only because she really "performed" the brilliant words by PG Wodehouse, but because Kern was a master of subtle melody. The choir's appropriation of some solo songs by Rodgers, Loewe and even Bernstein also functioned perfectly because the melodies are so strong that one doesn't miss the glorious sound of (for example) Ezio Pinza in South Pacific or the star quality of Julie Andrews in "My Fair Lady". Congratulations. A really successful change of subject matter which the choir really brought off.

There's much to look forward to from Eastbourne Choral Society: Haydn's "The Seasons" on 2nd December, and RVW's "Sea Symphony" on March 24th, both at All Saints Church.