

PUCCINI and POULENC from EASTBOURNE CHORAL SOCIETY

Robin Gregory reviews concert in All Saints Church

John Hancorn, Musical Director and experienced conductor of Eastbourne Choral Society, made a thrilling choice when he decided to perform Puccini's *Messa di Gloria* and Poulenc's *Gloria* in the same concert. One is very Italian, the other very French. The Puccini is the work of a young genius of twenty-two, whereas the Poulenc dates from near the end of the composer's life. But despite their contrasts, both present choral music at its finest.

"Thrilling" indeed, but presenting several problems. Both demand outstanding soloists, but the Puccini requires a tenor and a bass, whereas the Poulenc's only soloist is a soprano. Furthermore, both need fine orchestral forces: this is not easy music! In the event the decision was taken to use a solo piano to "stand in" for an orchestra; and how fortunate that on 2nd July at All Saints Church the pianist was exceptional: Rachel Fryer, well done!

There were plusses and minuses in the use of a piano. On the whole it best suited the Poulenc, who was, as it happens, himself a fine pianist. In the Puccini the soaring melodies sometimes cried out for that bed of string sound on which the tenor soloist's voice could float. Paul Austin Kelly, however, displayed a fine resonant sound, with opulent top notes and great musicality, so there was something to be said for the clarity with which we could hear him, set against the beautifully-judged playing of Rachel Fryer. In the Poulenc the sensitive singing of the choir could be appreciated without their appearing to "fade", as sometimes happens when a French orchestra really lets rip. Rachel Shouksmith (soprano) seemed really to relish the high, soaring tessitura of her part, giving a performance to treasure.

Tenor Paul Austin Kelly and bass Geoffrey Moses offered a couple of bonbons after the Poulenc *Gloria*, before the interval. Paul's was by one of the Bononcini family of Italian musicians associated with Modena, later home to the great Luciano Pavarotti. It was good to hear that nearby Lewes (where Paul lives) is home to a fine tenor who could so delight us. Geoffrey gave us the short Coat aria from the end of *La Bohème*. This is a true bass voice. I rather wish he had chosen to sing the big aria from *South Pacific*, following in the footsteps of Italian bass Ezio Pinza who sang the première in New York. Then we should have heard from him the words which most exactly describe this ECS concert: "Some Enchanted Evening".