

Christmas starts with Eastbourne Choral Society

ROBIN GREGORY is set thinking by the ECS's recent performance.

As she listened to the high standard achieved by the choir she founded, Elizabeth Muir-Lewis no doubt felt proud of her offspring. On November 26th at All Saints Church a large audience was able to enjoy a rare performance of a work dating from the end of the seventeenth century, a composition of great beauty by Marc-Antoine Charpentier, a Mass intended originally to be performed at midnight as Christmas Eve becomes Christmas Day.

Woe betide a choral society which tackles such a work without considering the problems of musical style. The ECS is fortunate in having two guiding hands (well, strictly four "hands", I suppose) who are supremely well-placed to solve the problems and to guide the rehearsals: conductor John Hancorn and organist David Force. Both have academic achievement and performing experience enabling them, for example, to line up a suitable instrumental group (here known as *Eastbourne Players*) and to select young soloists who can respond intelligently to the work's interpretative demands. More importantly, they can instil a determination within the choir to come to grips with the difficulties inherent in Charpentier's work, and then, at the actual performance, their own skills can provide a reliable solidity which brings out the best from every performer.

There's little to say after that preamble except "Well done". The five movements were clearly delineated. The five soloists (Alexandra Hutton, Ansy Boothroyd, Alexandra Rogers, Nick Pritchard and Alex Moore) sang well, with the two sopranos especially good in a short duet. The six period-instrument players, led by Julia Bishop, with David Force at the (presumably electronic) baroque organ, were at all times a delight, notably so in the "skipping" mini-interlude between the *Credo* and the *Sanctus*, and again as they alone ended this moving work.

The choir (beautifully turned out, as always) gave the conductor 98 percent of everything he demanded, managing the changes of tempo amazingly well. If I say that they would be even better if they now did it all again, that is in no way a criticism. It states only that they could approach a repeat with a confidence born of one successful excursion into new territory. We all had a treat.

After the interval, the four *Coronation Anthems* by Handel displayed the astonishing distance choral music travelled in some fifty years after Charpentier. Here the choir was in familiar territory, and they gave their entry in *Zadok the Priest* such power that one searched for the non-existent other hundred singers. Throughout, this was a fine example of a choral society rising to a high standard, enjoying every minute and entralling the audience. David Force moved to the main church organ, from where he provided not only ideal support for Handel, but also gave three beautifully-played *Voluntaries* - by Travers, Boyce and Prellieur. He is such an unassuming "star" !