

## **Bedford Choral Society**

### **Opera Gala Evening**

*Saturday, June 14<sup>th</sup> 2014*

*Bedford Corn Exchange*

'An Evening at the Opera' has become a popular title for a summer concert, and is often the means by which a choral society rounds off the season. Audiences know the music will be accessible, familiar and not extreme, and that no item will last too long. But such a concert is less straightforward to programme, let alone execute. Singers must be paced, mood must have a sense of direction and the inevitable 'bittiness' has to be avoided: in addition some of this music makes great demands on the performer, both musically and technically. So in a sense the evening was a showcase for Bedford Choral Society and its musical partner Bedfordshire Symphony Orchestra.

They were certainly well supported: the Corn Exchange was almost full, and it was good to see children and the young in attendance – whether under duress to support their elders need not detain us: they were there. The accent was on enjoyment, and almost immediately the audience was invited to take part, by humming along in the *Entry of the Toreadors* and, later, giving a boost to the percussion in the *Anvil chorus*.

This was essentially the choir's evening, and they presented a wide-ranging programme, in mood and style. It was a pity they sang in English, though, and it caused some difficulties in the *Voyagers' Chorus*, where the sibilants of 'haste set sail' took some time to clear. As always the entries were telling, and some in the *Anvil chorus* were uncertain, as were some notes in the *Chorus of peasant girls*. The *Polovtsian Dances* had mixed fortunes; the small cohort of tenors struggled with the exposed passages, the choir was a little copy-bound on occasions, and words were not always audible. Yet there was also some confident and full-throated singing. The choir was at its best with long shaped phrases, and a homophonic texture, and the *Voyagers Chorus* worked well, in that regard. But it was the *Hebrew Slaves* who really came off the page. The singing was first-rate, here: understood, shaped and with a lovely sound.

It was ably supported by the orchestra, who delivered some fine and feisty playing. If they sometimes overwhelmed the singers and got the bit between their collective teeth, as happened in the *Humming Chorus*, they were also capable of providing a shapely and balanced accompaniment minutes later in the *Flower Song*. As a section the strings were a little uneven, and while the lower strings were consistently rich and warm the violins had some thin sounds and some uncertain playing. But the zephyr winds in the *Voyages' Chorurs* were exquisite, *Toreadors* had a warm and sustained sound, and the *Intermezzo* was confident and impassioned. There was some fine woodwind playing, even if, as a

section, there was some uncertainty and imprecise chording and intonation. The brass played with vigour and a real sense of enjoyment, as well they should have done with some of this material. Michael Rose provided a clear and precise direction for both choir and orchestra, even if it was a little workmanlike, at times: parts of the *Overture* came across as 'safe' rather than sparkling. His introductions were excellent, though: trenchant and informed, and all with a light touch.

The soloists had some fine moments. Peter Hoare came into his own in *Nessun Dorma* (though it seemed an odd choice with which to end the evening), where the sound was warm and sustained, and he had the musical authority to give the music chance to breathe (the orchestra was in its element, here). There was some fine acting in the *Humming Song*, where he and Louise Owen were most convincing as husband and wife ... Rebecca Afonwy-Jones is a singer to watch, with a fine and rich sound. She was less convincing as a seductress in *Habanera* because she did or could not assert herself musically, and dictate the tempo and flow. The effect was a little relentless, whereas this music needs to be fluid and driven by the soloist. *Softly awakes my heart* was much more successful, in this regard, though the accompaniment is more generous to the singer.

The result was a programme with something for everyone, and one which was much appreciated by its audience. If there were flaws in the performance they were small and short-lived. Bedford Choral Society should congratulate itself on judging its audience well, and for providing such a pleasurable evening.

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