

Attention to detail paid dividends

THE bright, sunny scene of St. Aidan's church in Hexham, on Saturday was the setting for the Spring concert by the Hexham Orpheus Choir.

Under their conductor Dave Cave, the choir featured soloists Mary Millar (soprano), Margaret Watt (contralto), Les Hodgson (tenor) and Jonathan Hewitt (bass), with piano accompaniments by Camille Lazaro and Elspeth Christie.

Two large scale works were performed, Mozart's 'Solemn Vespers', and Poulenc's 'Gloria'. Both these works, despite being ambitious choices were given competent and dedicated performances.

Mozart composed his setting of the Vespers, an evening service in the Roman Catholic Church, in 1780, and it consists of five psalms and the Magnificat, each movement being varied in mood, from energetic to reflective and finally to grandiose, with full choir interspersed with solo quartet and soprano solo.

The choir produced a pleasing sonority with good intonation, clear diction and an infectious rhythmic sense. Dynamic levels were well controlled, though one would have liked a more decisive approach and greater projection of tone in the forte passages, especially in the soprano line.

The quartet of soloists achieved a good ensemble which balanced well, whilst the well-known soprano solo 'Laudate Dominum' was memorable for its beautifully poised and restrained interpretation by Mary Millar, a mood superbly matched by the choir when

joining her towards the close of the movement.

Though the piano reduction of the orchestral score would have benefited from less sustaining pedal there was nevertheless very able and sensitive support from the accompanist Camille Lazaro.

The other work presented by the choir was the 'Gloria' by Poulenc, an even more formidable task. This work for solo soprano, choir and orchestra was composed in 1959 and first performed in 1961, two years before Poulenc's death.

It is a mixture of the reverent, joyful, rhythmic and mysterious, dividing the 'Gloria' into six separate movements.

These ever changing moods were well captured, and apart from a few lapses of intonation, the choir and soloist gave a polished and assured reading, abounding in energy when needed, yet contrasting in the restrained mystic nuances of the final movement.

The orchestral score was dexterously and expressively managed by the hands of Camille Lazaro.

Interspersed with the two large choral works were two solo items from Mary Millar, the first of which was Mozart's ever popular 'Alleluia' from the motet 'Exsultate Jubilate.'

A joyful, youthful work from the 17-year-old composer, it was a splendid vehicle for the superb voice of Mary Millar. Her expansive range of voice, tone and excellent breath control were shown to great advantage as she brought brilliance and panache to a truly outstanding performance. She was sympathetically accompanied by Elspeth Christie.

Mary Millar's second song was Poulenc's 'C', a tragic evocation of the dark days of 1940 as the French fled from invading forces over the bridges of Ce.

She showed great affinity with the shifting tonal centres of the French vocal style in her soul-searching performance of this melancholy song of the Loire.

The conductor, choir and

soloists are to be commended on their obviously detailed preparation of difficult works, resulting in an enjoyable evening.

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