

Review : A Fancy of Folk Songs

With snowdrops appearing and evenings getting lighter, it was a good time to further lift the spirits with a concert of folk music presented by the Cockermouth Harmonics. This took place in a well heated and well attended Christ Church on Saturday.

Under the direction of music director Ian Wright the choir treated us to music of a variety of styles and moods. The folk songs were mostly traditional, but in arrangements by twentieth century composers enhancing the music without destroying the spirit of the originals.

The choir was in good voice, and seems to have recovered a fine body of singers after the problems of Covid, although more men would have helped to balance the large number of sopranos.

The first half of the programme consisted of a selection of mostly familiar songs in arrangements by several different composers. The opening number 'Strawberry Fair' was effective, with a rippling piano accompaniment to the flowing melody. The gentle mood built up to a climax of sound before gradually dying down to its close. Bob Chilcott's 'Like a Singing Bird' is a clever arrangement of his own setting of Christina Rossetti's poem, interwoven with 'My Love is like a red, red Rose'. This was well handled by the choir, with the lines clearly defined.

'O Waly Waly' gave the various sections of the choir a chance to sing the melody, if only briefly. The gentle mood continued in Will Todd's 'The Rose'. More clarity of diction in the rather obscure words would have been helpful.

Mairi Bhan's Wedding began with a fine if brief bass solo from Tim Hirst, after which the choir really took off. The singing was light and lively, with strong rhythm and very effective dynamic contrasts. Perhaps they could have been let off the leash a bit earlier!

Chilcott's 'Lily and the Rose' began a little tentatively, but the phrases were nicely shaped, and the voices blended well.

Cecilia McDowell's 'A Fancy of Foksongs' is a set of four contrasted settings. In 'Green Bushes' the tune was effectively passed around the different sections. 'The Rambling Sailor' posed a challenge with its intricate and complex lines, and sounded somewhat unconfident at times. In 'The Crystal Spring' the sopranos and altos produced a freshness as well as warmth of sound. 'O No John' was sung with spirit and confidence and brought the first half of the concert to a lively close.

The second half was devoted to a set of eleven songs by John Rutter. Familiar to most church choirs, Rutter's music has instant appeal to singers and listeners alike. His musical knowledge and choral experience shows in how well he writes well for the voices, and here the choir seemed confident and at ease. The more intricate passages that he so often writes in his church music were frequently written into the piano part.

This was a well contrasted selection, with lively numbers, such as 'The Keel Row' which went with a real lilt, and 'The Miller of Dee', where the men let rip and the piano part was virtuosic. 'Willow Song' was very movingly sung, and a simple arrangement of 'Afton Water' brought the programme to a close. As a bonus, we were treated to an encore – Eric Whitacre's 'Glow'. This calm, atmospheric piece ended the concert on a high.

Most important mention has to be made of pianist Amanda Wright, who played tirelessly throughout. She captured the different styles and moods, from gently flowing sensitive accompaniments to virtuosic and dramatic passages. She has worked with her husband Ian throughout the rehearsals and helped the singers when they needed support.

Ian Wright has steered his choir through a very difficult period. He gave them plenty of challenges in this programme. They responded with enthusiasm, and, despite a few blemishes and occasional tuning problems, rewarded him for all his hard work.

Sue Ralph

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