

REVIEW

An Early Christmas Cracker, Harrogate Choral Society, St. Mark's Church, Harrogate

A combination of voices, organ and brass, mainly promoting the 2000-year-old seasonal message, proved to be a real winner in St. Mark's Church on Saturday, December 8th. The compère, Marilynne Davies, who was eloquent throughout, encouraged the large audience to think of the event as being "the start of Christmas" and for many it probably would have been.

Harrogate Choral Society were in excellent form; their precision and ensemble were such that they frequently sounded like a chamber choir rather than a group of almost 100 singers. The sopranos looked and, more importantly, sounded younger than in more recent times, but tended to dominate slightly on some occasions. Nevertheless the blend between the four sections made for a most lyrical sound and the articulation of their diction made it unnecessary to follow the carols' words all of which had been painstakingly prepared for printing in the programme.

The choir sang no less than 19 carols and five of these were for the audience to join in, all of them featuring David Willcocks's justifiably frequently-employed descants. All the carols related aspects of the Christian theme associated with the forthcoming time of year and in the hands of their Director, Andrew Padmore, each and every phrase of the text, however familiar, meant something special. He, himself, had arranged three of the carols, two of them being characterised by florid organ parts. These were played with delicacy and precision by Thomas Moore who accompanied with variety and imagination throughout. The third arrangement from Padmore, who was sporting a highly colourful festive waiscoat, was a beautiful version of *Away in a Manger* and this deserves further performances.

Other choral highlights included a fresh and well-contrasted version of *Ding, Dong Merrily on High* and a rapid performance of *Gaudete* in which Daniel Hutton articulated the tricky Latin words with outstanding clarity. The tuning throughout was well-nigh perfect, unaccompanied verses always ending 'spot on' so that the re-appearance of the organ made its return to the texture sound most natural.

Some of the secular aspects of 'Christmas' (previously known as Yuletide) were represented by some of the readings from members of Harrogate Dramatic Society as well as one of the arrangements performed by a brass quintet. The latter group added much to the concert, despite the strident opening to *Mary's Boy Child*, and also joined in to contribute effectively in the accompaniments to several carols. Some of the readings also added some amusement to the evening, Christine Littlewood's sense of timing and Stuart Kellett's thought-provoking contribution (both in reference to the turkey) were particularly memorable. Those two, together with Jenny Antram and John Glyn Jones, served well to remind the audience that, even in a building erected for religious purposes, 'Christmas' now meets a variety of purposes in 21st-century Britain.

Paul Dyson