

A valiant first-time attempt

WHEN an amateur choral society undertakes its first performance of a contemporary work, it is confronted by a number of challenging questions: will both choristers and orchestra cope with the possibly unfamiliar and testing musical idiom?

Will the textual language prove to be a hurdle? Will members enjoy rehearsals and be convinced that all is worthwhile? Will, indeed, an audience react favourably to similar questions?

For its concert in Kendal Parish Church, Staveley Choral Society gave itself such a challenge when Sue Osmaston, its guiding light, courageously presented Richard Blackford's *Mirror of Perfection*, a work for chorus, children's choir, baritone and soprano soloists and orchestra.

Together these forces valiantly attempted to convey the composer's sentiments in his settings of poems by St Francis of Assisi.

The choir, with the sopranos in particularly good voice, bravely faced its challenges although a more persuasive verbal projection and rhythmic precision would have been welcome.

Elleray Preparatory School's Festival Choir was largely inaudible but was singing beautifully whenever it was heard.

Brian Lancaster brought a solidity to the demanding baritone part while Anthea Kempston sang with a power (sometimes marred by suspect intonation) that instilled into the music the required dramatic flavour.

The orchestra, although generally performing its difficult role with commendable competence, tended to dominate proceedings.

The performance of Faure's *Requiem* was far less successful.

An imbalance between choir and orchestra; poor choral enunciation and intonation, imprecise and timid entries resulting in a loss of dramatic fervour; a *Pie Jesu* from Anthea Kempston that I thought was below the expected standard – all this, despite Brian Lancaster's noble *Libera*, left me hugely disappointed.

Overall, though, the concert was a laudable achievement, vindicating Sue Osmaston's original vision.

Leisure, Friday, May 28, 2008