

# Choral Society's season off to a flying start

Ripon Cathedral, November 4<sup>th</sup>: a review by John Dunford.

In their second season under the direction of Andrew Padmore Harrogate Choral Society brought to Ripon Cathedral a performance of passion, power and panache. On show were two works intended for small forces sung by a choir of considerable size to the accompaniment of piano, harmonium and with frequent off-stage fireworks!

Singing from memory the concert began with Fauré's intimate *Cantique de Jean Racine*. With the choir's attention focussed solely on the conductor the delightful miniature was moulded into a captivating performance. The legato style of the piece was maintained throughout and the full dynamic capabilities of the choir realised, though the balance between the choir and accompaniment, which was to prove a problem throughout the evening became apparent, the rippling triplets being lost either by the sustained chords in the harmonium or the strength of the choral singing.

The main work of the evening was the Rossini *Petite Messe Solennelle*, which is hardly small in scale or solemn in style. Also intended as an intimate piece for just twelve singers initially, including four soloists, to the accompaniment of two pianos and harmonium, it has humour in abundance and is well suited to the Society's larger forces, Rossini having orchestrated it subsequently.

The choir were in fine voice and it was clear from the outset that Andrew Padmore has been busy developing a full and forthright tone to the choir. Most exciting and impressive were occasions where the choir employed this new found strength of tone such as the unaccompanied opening of the *Gloria* and in the extended fugal movements. Sung at a breathless pace, it was effectively used in the *Cum Sancto Spiritu*, in which the fugue subject was clearly defined in each voice part, and although some definition of the quaver detail was lost in the acoustic of the Cathedral at this pace the excitement of the final *accelerando* at the end of the first half of the concert was exhilarating.

The control of a wide range of tone was once again evident in both the tricky unaccompanied *Sanctus* where tuning can be a problem, but the benefits of their current training paid dividends with choir and soloists remaining absolutely in tune and some well shaped musical phrasing achieved.

Bonaventura Bottone, tenor, was the outstanding soloist. His *tour de force* was the *Domine Deus* in which the audience and choir alike sat up and began to smile as they were drawn into a superb performance of wonderful Italianate character in what is arguably the most operatic and comic moment of this so called solemn mass. His was, throughout, a performance of expressive colour, experience and musical awareness.

Thomas Eaglen, bass, shows great promise and has a fine young voice. Dawn Furness, soprano, has a lovely tone and was at her best in the *O Salutaris* aria, but she was musically out of touch, her whole performance lacking conviction.

Joanna Gamble, mezzo-soprano, had been excellent throughout but brought the concert to a climactic ending with a stunningly passionate and dramatic performance of the *Agnus Dei*.

The rather understated harmonium accompaniment was given superbly by Gareth Green who was allowed the opportunity to shine in the delightful fugal movement before the *Sanctus*, using the variety of colour available to the full.

Andrew Padmore has clearly made a significant impact on Harrogate Choral Society and he must have been delighted with the entire concert and the change of tone qualities he has achieved, but on this occasion the often unsung qualities of the accompanist of the Society for more than thirty years, Beryl Pankhurst, deserve the highest praise. The dramatic, passionate, sublime and comic were superbly achieved. Her playing was simply outstanding.