

A wonderful festive concert

ARCTIC weather conditions did not deter Eden Singers from going ahead with their annual Christmas concerts held at Penrith Methodist Church.

The Thursday evening concert was formally opened by Annie Timmins who introduced the musical director/conductor Gareth Cozens and also welcomed the return of Joan Urquhart as accompanist.

The newly-appointed organist for Eden Singers, John Slee, was also welcomed, as well as the superb Eden-based flautist Ben MacDougall, who was the invited soloist for the two concerts.

The program was, as ever, an eclectic mix of musical styles and genres which is part of the charm of the Eden Singers concerts. The choir opened with a polished rendition of Handel's *Joy to the World*, arranged by C. Prettyman. This was followed by Howard Blake's popular *Walking in the Air*, performed well by the choir, though there was perhaps a slight sense of holding back.

The Shepherd's Pipe Carol, by Rutter, was lovely, being further enhanced by Ben MacDougall's flute accompaniment and this was indeed a very enjoyable combination.

Highlights of the evening were undoubtedly Ben's solos, ably accompanied by Joan Urquhart at the piano. In the first half of the concert Ben played a selection of pieces and the first, *Christmas Eve, Ellis Island*, by Phil Coulter, had a very evocative Celtic style, followed by one of Ben's own very moving compositions

Svalbard — The Final Journey of a Polar Bear. This was almost heart-rending as it took the listener on the journey of a polar bear searching for food, raising awareness to the plight of polar bears in the midst of global warming. The bear eventually dies but his spirit is released in the form of a colourful display of the Aurora Borealis, the scene depicted in the beautiful flute and piano arrangement. *Home Away From Home*, again by Phil Coulter, had a lovely Irish lilt in the style of a traditional folk tune.

The final piece before the short interval was by the male voice section of the choir and they sang *Shepherd, Shepherd* from an old spiritual arranged by Maurice Gardner. This had good balance and was well received.

The ladies' section of the choir began the second half with *Little Road to Bethlehem* (poem Bruce Blunt, music Michael Head). This was delightful, the choir having been trained and conducted by Audrey Kirkbride and accompanied at the piano by Nan Stobbs.

The whole choir also sang *Bethlehem Down* (poem Bruce Blunt, music Peter Warlock), followed by *The Lamb* (words William Blake, music John Tavener), and though quite challenging the choir performed them well, with subtle dynamics.

Ben's choice of solos in the second half was, firstly, an imaginative arrangement of his own entitled *Starlight Prelude*. This was a composition of Ben's superimposed over

Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Ben explained that the inspiration behind this work was Bach/Gounod's well known *Ave Maria*. It certainly worked very well and was appreciated by both choir and audience followed by a lovely folk tune, *The Gartan Mother's Lullaby* (trad).

Ben is certainly a very talented musician. He studied flute at the Royal College of Music in London and has performed at major venues all over the UK, Europe and the US, having also featured on radio and television. As a composer he has recently completed a series of scores for short films and is also a regular presenter for BBC Radio Cumbria.

His playing is warm and seemingly effortless and his style unassuming. Hopefully, we will have the pleasure of hearing him again at future Eden Singers concerts.

A selection of favourites, ranging from *Pie Jesu*, by Karl Jenkins, to *Grandma's Killer Fruitcake* (Elmo Shropshire and Rita Adams) were also included in the program, together with a surprise visit from that well known character Rudolph.

The audience had the opportunity to join in with carol singing, accompanied by the organ, and the concert concluded with a lively arrangement of *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, sung by the choir.

It was a successful concert and the choir, conductors and musicians are to be congratulated for a very enjoyable evening.

J. C. W.



MANY THANKS:
Watched by members, the chairman of Eden Singers, Anne Timmins, presents a cheque for £500 raised from concerts throughout the year to Rebecca Colpus, of the Eden-Keswick branch of the Alzheimer's Society.

Herald 11th Dec 2010