

# Penrith concert a triumph of musical collaboration

EDEN Singers gave an impressive Christmas concert at Penrith Methodist Church.

Since Louise Woof finished as musical director in the summer and Joan Urquhart retired as accompanist, Eden Singers members have been most grateful to John Helyer for coming to their rescue as both musical director and accompanist.

As others have found before, it is quite difficult to “cut yourself in two” and all concerned were delighted when choir member Maureen Wilson stepped up to the podium to help out with the conducting. John conducted the unaccompanied items and Maureen the bulk of the program, with John a most fluent and sensitive accompanist at the piano.

With their stage platform, smart black attire (ladies with bright blue scarves), well-lit performance space and orderly entrance, it was clear to see that the Eden Singers had prepared an evening of festive choral favourites to take our minds off another wet and wild night.

Compere Jo Laycock besides informing the audience of the background to many of the carols also gave an invitation to possible new members with a special plea for altos, tenors and basses. Numbering around 35, the Eden Singers produced a good, warm, balanced sound throughout.

What chance a Rutter-free Christmas? (John Rutter is a leading composer of carols and other choral music). Not on this occasion! We were treated to five Rutter carols. *Cradle Song* set the standard for the evening with clear diction and expressive singing. The men sang a hearty unison verse and the second sopranos did well in the final verse. In *Sans Day Carol* it is hard to sing “holly” in the chorus when the stress makes it easier to sing “Ho-lee”.

Pam Armstrong and Jacquie Kidd were two well-matched soloists in Rutter’s *Angels Carol* — another successful musical collaboration. Later, there was more Rutter, a flowing *Nativity Carol* and *The Very Best Time of the Year*, when the men maybe should have worn Val Doonican-style jumpers and woolly hats.

Each half of the concert was given shape and variety by the sizeable audience joining the choir singing *O*

*Little Town of Bethlehem* and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* with John Slee on the organ.

Special pleasures were the contributions by students from Penrith’s Queen Elizabeth Grammar School accompanied by head of music Sarah Massey. In the first half, sisters Kasia and Monika Davies played the beautiful slow movement from Bach’s Double Violin Concerto followed by the lively Allegro. They caught the mood well with long legato phrases, pleasing tone and intonation and controlled bowing techniques, accompanied by a firm bass line. Another satisfying musical collaboration!

In the second half, Eddie Davies delighted the audience with two clarinet pieces, the second of which, *The Lazy Trumpeter*, in a jazz style, had character and humour, which Eddie performed with cool nonchalance.

Other choir highlights included John Helyer conducting *I Saw a Maiden* and *Coventry Carol* with careful attention to phrasing, dynamics and word endings, and Maureen Wilson conducting a dramatic performance of *The Crown of Roses* with music by Tchaikovsky. Perhaps *The Shepherd’s Farewell* by Berlioz would have benefitted from a quieter dynamic and a slightly slower pace.

Sarah Rodgers was an accomplished soloist in *O Holy Night* where the Eden Singers distinguished themselves in support, especially on the repeated lines “Fall on your knees” and “He knows our need”.

Lighter music to finish with featured *Do You Hear What I Hear?* With what sounded like “drums” in the background and *The Little Drummer Boy* with some “brums” in the foreground — nonsense syllables or imitation sounds.

At the end of a long evening the ladies still had plenty in reserve for *Walking in the Air* and after a unison start it was good to hear the sopranos and the altos fulfilling their usual roles-tune and harmony.

Finally, a rousing rendition of *Joy to the World* to send us out into the rain, full of Christmas goodwill and festive joy.

I. F.