

The Herald April 29th 2015

# Celebration of song — from traditional to pop

WITH the weather cool and the skyline of mountains and fells topped again with snow, there was a warm welcome at Penrith Methodist Church for Eden Singers' spring concert "Songtime 2015".

The selection was a real celebration of song, traditional, classical and early 19th Century up to today's pop.

For one night only (traditionally the choir would perform on two consecutive nights) the church was nicely filled as the concert began with arrangements of three familiar songs.

First we were in 1911 America with Irving Berlin's *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, then back home with a traditional ballad, *The Gypsy Rover*, seeking to win the heart of a lady. *Westering Home*, a song with a Scottish folk flavour, written by Hugh S. Robertson in the 1920s, ended the group.

Many will remember him as conductor of Glasgow Orpheus Choir and composer of that choral classic *All in the April Evening*.

A second group of pieces, typical of

the programming mixing the secular and sacred, began with the 12 men of the choir performing that male voice favourite *Morte Christe*, with one of their number, deputy conductor John Helyer, conducting.

Nicely sung, with the clear line of first tenors bringing out Isaac Watts's poignant poetry in the unaccompanied "See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down". Then the whole of the men's voices resounding out "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all".

The choir's conductor, Louise Wooff, made interesting comments regarding the music throughout the concert, as with her reference to the music of Gabriel Faurea, composer, who would be one of the precursors of French impressionism in music, paralleling that of impressionism in art during the late 19th Century.

So to his *Cantique de Jean Racine*, an early work. The constantly moving piano part against the choir's legato singing was a reminder of the importance to the Eden Singers of

their accompanist Joan Urquhart, a mainstay of the choir over many years.

And so to an abrupt change of mood and music with *Wonderful World*, bringing the gravelly voice of Louis Armstrong to mind. A medley of John Denver favourites, *You Fill Up My Senses*, *Fly Away*, and *Take Me Home*, *Country Road*, completed part one of the evening's program.

The choir had invited students of Ullswater Community College, Penrith, to take part and they brought the music right up to date as Megan Harrison sang her own composition with the group Zig Zagg, Nathan Byrne, lead guitar; Daniel Harrison, bass guitar; and John Jackson on drums.

Introducing her final song, written by fellow Cumbrian Fiona Clayton, Megan added a heartfelt "she is an inspiration to us all". Later it was the turn of Emily Richardson, with John Jackson now accompanying on the piano. After singing *Memories*, from *Cats*, she dispensed with the mic, showing off her vocal technique quite

convincingly as she ended with *You* from the musical *Ghost*.

Returning to the choir, the ladies sang the rhythmically testing *Chattanooga Choo Choo*, familiar from the Glen Miller era.

A full choir rendition of the once-popular, calypso-like *Yellow Bird* was followed by the chanting of the Rev. Eli Jenkins prayer from *Under Milk Wood*, by Dylan Thomas, very "tongue in cheek" as Louise Wooff explained to the audience.

A selection of songs from Lionel Bart's *Oliver* brought the evening to a close. But for me *Requiem Aeternam* (part 1) within this mix of musical contrasts brought out the best in the choir. It was composed by Stephen Urquhart, son of Joan, the choir's accompanist, when he was 19 years old.

The powerfully moving bass line underpins the harmonic strength of the piece, the full choir building to a glorious climax and then dying away on a sustained *Requiem Aeternam*.

L. K. T.