

Voices of Christmas

The Voices of Exmoor celebrated Christmas with a wonderful programme of carols and songs in two concerts at Dulverton Town Hall. This genuine community choir welcomes *anyone* and their joy in singing is in itself worth watching.

As it turned out, the two performances were different – the Friday concert was much affected by the awful coughs and colds, which had afflicted everyone, including the audience. The first item on Friday was ‘*Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*’ and as the sopranos failed to hit their top notes squarely it looked as though it would be a somewhat threadbare event. However, they warmed up and battled on bravely. On Saturday night, with strong encouragement from Musical Director Amanda Taylor, they produced an altogether better performance I hear, and all ended well.

On Friday night, the first item was notable for the warmth of the altos and the security of the male line-up, followed by *Jingle Bells*, which showed precision and togetherness. *In the Bleak Midwinter* featured a soprano solo, well-pitched if a little nervous – more of this please! The men-only verse gave us well-matched voices, which was gentle and pleasing. *O Holy Night*, a lovely arrangement for the women, again benefited from strong under-pinning by the altos. *Let it be Christmas* was sung by Kevin Lowes; struggling through a bad cold, nevertheless every word was clear and efforts to include the audience in the meaning was endearing; spoken words were charming and musically presented so, again, more please. The final choir item in the first half was *Virgin Mary had a Baby Boy*, sung without scores, showing enjoyment of the complex gospel style rhythms. Two audience carols had punctuated the programme – all good fun.

The chosen charity this year is the West Somerset Advice Bureau and the organiser gave an inspiring talk on its work and the need for extra volunteers to train, to enable them to reach more people. Judging from the generous donations given as the audience left, she seems to have hit her target, especially if a few of us agree to help deliver this absolutely essential service. As modern life becomes ever more complicated, the presence of help and advice with the most basic negotiations can literally save lives.

After an interval featuring delicious Christmassy nibbles and a great deal of talking, the second half began with *While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night* set to the tune of On Ilkley Moor. Personally, I prefer traditional melodies we can mentally hum along to. It’s rather like staging a play in a different period from the original, sometimes it works and sometimes not, and this setting felt rather inappropriate. The audience song that followed was fun, with a solo, the community then singing the basic tune whilst the choir did its own thing, a women’s verse, a men’s verse – never a dull moment – good choices.

The Shepherds Pipe Carol, a well known Rutter special, is difficult to sing. Amanda warned us and advised us to listen to the piano if the choir got into troubled waters – a moment of fun. True to her usual form, brilliant accompanist Joke Routledge, not only helped the choir over a couple of humps but delighted us with the accompaniment, which does indeed twinkle, twirl and sparkle. The choir is lucky to have such accomplished musicians in their leader and pianist.

The fourth item stepped aside from Christmas to pick up a harvest theme featuring lines from ‘Lorna Doon’, read beautifully by Heather Hodgson – totally audible and expressive, as you might expect from someone with so much theatrical experience. She was followed by the men, standing out front, singing a *harvest song* with great gusto,

and from memory. Impressive! The words were taken from the book and set by Eldridge.

Angels from the Realms of Glory was another re-arrangement by a young composer, Todd. This one worked well, the choir evidently enjoyed it and produced some moments of really good tone, lovely to listen to.

By the time we got to the next audience carol my own throat was nurturing a resident amphibian, along with many in the audience, and *O come All Ye Faithful* has been better sung.

Sleep, Holy Babe was sung from memory and panic registered on the faces of many choir members. However, every verse featured a beautiful entry, thrillingly warm in tone and perfectly together. Singing in parts, from memory, when you are used to using a score is demanding, but well worth pursuing as it releases the singer from the hassle of scores and allows everyone to find the beauty in the music.

The final number was the jolly *Merry Christmas Cha Cha Cha*, sung with gusto and much audience foot tapping. Well done everyone – the audience thought you were heroic to turn up and sing despite nursing colds, and somehow manage to create a fun evening in the best tradition of the Voices of Exmoor.

If I had one non-musical piece of advice it would be for someone to produce a lapel mike for Amanda, so we oldies don't miss her punch lines!

This is a truly worthwhile choir to support – every singer dresses in smart black and this time the ladies were adorned with a wide variety of Christmas twinkles. It is lovely to see singers of such varied experience working together to produce an enjoyable show for a paying audience.

Lighting was provided by Simon Williams.

The Choir

Sopranos: Janet Bale, Hazel Bedward, Michelle Clarke, Caroline Darley, Ann Durbin, Carolyn Maggs, Lindy Mitchell, Jan Ross and Joyce Vanstone.

Altos: Anne Ansell, Emily Brockington, Judy Butler, Jane Collins, Mary Davies, Magdalena Harding, Heather Hodgson, Mary Le Coyte, Linda Ruthven-Tyers, and Jan Weaver.

Tenors: Peter Hanlon, Iain Joyce, Ian Lawrence and Paul Matthews,

Basses: Paul Butler, John Golding, Kevin Lawes and Philip Stearing.