

An Evening with
The City of Chester Male Voice Choir
& Waverton Handbell Ringers

Saturday 22nd May 2010
at Hamilton Street Church, Hoole, Chester

The City of Chester Male Voice Choir gave their annual concert at Hamilton Street Methodist Church on Saturday evening, 22nd May 2010. On this occasion, contrasting music was played by the Waverton Handbell Ringers as well as by the Church's organist and concert organizer, John Evans, who introduced each of the groups as well as giving a splendid vote of thanks at the end. Lance Howie, a member of the Choir, was the compere of the Choir's items, and he helped to provide a warm, entertaining atmosphere throughout this concert. As always, Helen Everett was excellent in her piano accompaniments, showing great sensitivity as well as fine dexterity in intricate passages, while their conductor, Rodney T Jones, directed fine, well-controlled performances in uplifting interpretations; he also made interesting comments on some items, as well as this being the first concert in which the Church's fine new piano was used.

A rousing start came in Gwyn Arch's arrangement of the opening chorus from Vivaldi's "Gloria in D major", with a strong, sonorous choral sound and Helen's admirable playing of the original orchestral part on the piano; this was one of several items in this concert which they have recently added to their repertoire. "Deep Harmony" was one of the items included in their appearance at London's Royal Albert Hall last October, and had striking contrasts between wordless parts and sonorous full harmony sections. They showed versatility in singing "Lascia ch'io pianga" from Handel's opera "Rinaldo", in Italian, most expressively, followed by a thrilling, exciting reading of "Havah Nagilah", the later part being sung in Yiddish, after Helen's brilliant piano interlude.

John introduced Kate Sawallisch, the Director of the Waverton Handbell Ringers, who told the audience about them (now 10 years old) and the music they played. One of their members is Diane Grant, a member of this Church. Though two players were not available this evening, they adapted splendidly, and played all their pieces in the middle of Part One, starting with a bright, uplifting performance of "God's Train", complete with a shout of "All aboard!" at the start and a train whistle near the end! Kate then introduced a smaller group within their main body; six players who meet on Thursday afternoons (there are now three groups), directed by Wendy Robinson in two pieces from Jerry Bock's "Fiddler on the Roof": beautiful, lyrical sounds in "Sunrise, Sunset" and a splendid rhythmic feel in "If I Were A Rich Man"; it was amazing how much variety was achieved by such a small group. Kate then returned to direct the full group in an enjoyable, gentle interpretation of the "Ice Castles" film theme followed by a marvellous arrangement of the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness", which was most uplifting, with good contrasts in it including delicate as well as powerful sounds. Finally, Kate introduced the American composer Kevin McChesney's "Grand March Redux" for handbells with organ, played by John, which all came over most successfully, with his sensitive organ playing blending well with the joyous sounds of this superb handbell group, the balance between organ and handbells being excellent.

Lance returned to introduce three more items from the Choir to end Part One: a brilliant arrangement of "This Old Man" which was given a thrilling performance, with great clarity of words in the faster sections, clear contrapuntal entries, good versatility in rapid changes of speeds and moods, with catchy rhythmic vitality! "The Pasture" made a lovely contrast, with lyrical and sonorous singing, followed by a fine 1985 setting of "There Is A Green Hill" by Glyn Thomas (now 91 years old!) called "The Valley Of The Roses", with which the Choir brought Part One to an uplifting conclusion.

John told the audience about the next concert, to be given on Saturday 31st July by the organist Keith Hearnshaw, in an interesting programme including unusual features (he has been here before, providing the Big Screen Presentation for Nigel Ogden's latest concerts), followed by Lance introducing the Choir's opening group of pieces in Part Two, starting with another of the items sung in their appearance at London's Royal Albert Hall last October: "With A Voice Of Singing", in a strong, vigorous performance including some fine piano playing by Helen. William Stickles' arrangement of "Unchained Melody" made a lyrical contrast, with good, expressive, sonorous singing. Then came another contrast in Percy Fletcher's arrangement of "A Roman War Song From Rienzi", an early opera by Wagner (whose anniversary it was today: born 22nd May 1813), in which the Choir showed more versatility by singing some parts in Latin (in music which also appears in the Overture of this opera), and producing a grand, stirring performance.

John introduced a selection of pieces in a light theatre organ style, which he played without a break and made for varied and entertaining listening in a really enjoyable, well contrasted performance, with an imaginative range of registrations, including themes from "Last Of The Summer Wine", "Miss Marple", "Hello Dolly", "Till", "The Stein Song" (in which he produced a magical effect by using the Zymbelstern – small bells – stop), "Where Is Love", and ending with "I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside", making a really uplifting, jolly conclusion, especially since, as John remarked in his introduction, the weather had turned very hot, and – that afternoon – Blackpool had won the football championship play-off final, to gain promotion to the Premiership!

Lance then commented on the variety of the programme, with John's organ playing and the handbells, as well as their Choir pieces, and the new piano (as also mentioned earlier). The opening item in their final group was another arrangement by Glyn Thomas: "Here's To The Heroes" (the first time it has been arranged for male voice choir), which they included in their April 2010 concert in Chester Cathedral, and which Rodney said was based on the John Dunbar theme from John Barry's music for "Dances With Wolves", here receiving a majestic, uplifting, sonorous performance. Two contrasting pieces arranged by John Rutter from his "Sprig of Thyme" followed: "The Salley Gardens", with good, gentle, lyrical singing, and "The Miller of Dee" in a bright, vigorous, rhythmic performance including an especially effective piano contribution by Helen. "Carrickfergus" in another arrangement by Gwyn Arch was lovely, with a most moving quiet ending.

John then made his splendid vote of thanks, in which he referred to Lance's remark, in Part One, about them looking on this Church as "their home"; since they rehearse here twice a week, and special rounds of applause were given to the handbell ringers, Helen for her outstanding piano playing, Lance for the warmth of his introductions, and Rodney's excellent work, along with the Choir. Lance then introduced the Choir's final item – "American Trilogy", which was notable for sonorous, lyrical (in the gentler central part) and rousing singing to end a most successful concert, enthusiastically enjoyed by an audience of 75, who were sent home with some well-chosen, warm words from Lance.

Ian Milnes – 23rd May 2010