

British music to celebrate the jubilee

Robin Gregory reviews a large-scale concert at St Saviour's Church

Graham Jones chose everything well for this choral event featuring some 200 performers on Sunday 22 April. An all-British concert, featuring many local performers, was a fine way to get everyone in the mood for the Diamond Jubilee celebrations; and the works chosen could hardly have been more appropriate. The National Anthem, of course, came first, bringing the packed house to its feet: but not just *any* version of *God Save the Queen*. This was Benjamin Britten's: pianissimo to start, rising to a great climax, demonstrating the skills of the Eastbourne College Choral Society and the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra even before the actual 'concert' got under way.

It was brave to programme *Cockaigne*, Elgar's wonderful celebration of London, to begin the evening's real business. The choir had, perforce, to sit silent: which they managed admirably, while the orchestra tackled a very tricky showpiece. The performance filled the vast spaces of Street's great church with wonderful sound; every section of the orchestra, especially the brass, was in good form.

Handel's naturalisation came just in time for his setting of Psalm 21 *The King Shall Rejoice* to be adjudged British. Orchestra and choir were in fine fettle, and swiftly swept us back to the eighteenth century, before offering more Elgar: his *Give Unto the Lord* of 1914. This setting of Psalm 29 is problematic, because its rich scoring for the orchestra tends to overpower even the largest choir, particularly when, as on this occasion, the listeners are nearer to the orchestra than to the singers. We were glad to have an excellent programme booklet with the words.

After the interval, Rutter's *Mass of the Children* showed what can be achieved by a composer who clearly knows all about the problems of balancing his forces in the echoing vault of a church. The orchestral scoring is deliberately lightweight, so we can catch the words even of the *Children's* Choir. And *what* a fine body of singers we enjoyed: the College Choral Society as secure as always, and the youngsters of St Andrew's Prep School committed, accurate and pure, and all well rehearsed by their Director of Music Alison Wicks. Of the five contrasted sections I noted especially the *Sanctus*, with its delicate Fauré-like orchestral introduction; the *Agnus Dei*, in which the prep school choir sang Blake's poem *Little Lamb, who made thee?* with admirable clarity and tone; and the *Finale*, which brought together both choirs and two excellent soloists, baritone Alistair Ollerenshaw and soprano Jenny Stafford. Not surprisingly the applause was loud and prolonged.