

**Lewis Foreman** - eminent musicologist, reviewer in Gramophone magazine and adviser to several record companies has given our concert on Saturday October 28<sup>th</sup> this review. Be proud of what we achieved!

**Vaughan Williams: *Dona Nobis Pacem; Five Mystical Songs*. Max Bruch: *Violin Concerto No 1*; Brahms: *Geistliches Lied; Academic Festival Overture*.**

Watford Philharmonic Society, conductor Michael Cayton. The Grand Hall, Bushey Arena.

We live in an area notably rich in excellent choral societies, all achieving very acceptable standards of performance with interesting repertoire. But every so often one will find a concert which is quite outstanding and we were fortunate indeed to attend the Watford Philharmonic concert at Bushey Arena on Saturday 28 October for just such an occasion. I had been attracted by the Vaughan Williams programme of *Dona Nobis Pacem* and *Five Mystical Songs*, and it had long been in my diary, and it was worth the wait.

Celebrated choral conductor the late John Alldis, when chairman of the judges for the Millennium Choral Competition in 2001 remarked after seeing a dozen performances: 'the man out front is responsible for what ensues. It is the conductor who enables his performers to seek the "now", the "moment".' Conductor Michael Cayton certainly succeeded on Saturday, inspiring his forces to excel in *Dona Nobis Pacem* finding a remarkable power and eloquence. This was exciting music making, with great impact in a comparatively small hall and a strong emotional challenge. The choir announced their programme long ago so they cannot have known what a timely commentary it would actually be in the face of world events.

The mood was set by the *Five Mystical Songs* – always a sure-fire winner – in which baritone Gabriel Gottlieb was the eloquent soloist. There were issues of balance: the orchestra perhaps tending to be too loud at many points, and the soloist having to make decisions as to what actually constitutes 'piano' in such an unsympathetic acoustic involving so many performers. Nevertheless it was glorious, the soloist magical in the familiar fourth movement 'The Call' when the choir are silent, grand when the soloist did not sing in 'Antiphon' – the familiar 'Let all the World in every corner sing' – when the choir were able to let rip.

It all came together in *Dona Nobis Pacem*, a splendid dynamic performance high-lighted by the soaring soprano solos of Emily Rowley Jones punching through the din and the thoughtful lyricism of solo baritone Gabriel Gottlieb. He achieved his most rapt moments in 'Reconciliation' as he sang 'Word over all, beautiful as the sky' achieving the perfect balance not taking the marking 'piano' too seriously as we all focussed on the text, throat-catching in its impact. (Indeed the words were remarkably clearly articulated throughout in this performance, an aspect of choral singing not always achieved even by the most senior choirs, and essential here.) Again the solo soprano in the closing pages although marked to be sung more and more quietly was wonderfully well heard – 'Dona nobis pacem'. It was indeed something special.

The Bruch *Violin Concerto No 1* at the end of the first half was a striking contrast, given a remarkable poise by the 17-year old soloist, Danielle Lee, who enchanted the capacity audience. Two pieces by Brahms completed the programme: the short choral *Geistliches Lied* ('Sacred song') and Brahms *Academic Festival Overture*, when I suddenly had a moment of anticipation – 'good Lord surely they are not going to do Malcolm Sargent's choral finale last heard at the 1992 Proms' – but no, we had lots of really beery student song but it was only played by the band. Memorable evening though.

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