

Audience rewarded for 'endurance'

ALTHOUGH St. Mary's Parish Church, Nantwich, was something of an "ice box" on Saturday night, the audience who turned up in goodly numbers — some fortified with hot water bottles and car rugs — to hear the presentation of a double bill of Christmas music by Nantwich and District Choral Society were amply rewarded for their spartan endurance.

The first three-quarters of an hour was taken up with the infrequently-heard Christmas Story by Heinrich (Sagittarius) Schutz, that great 17th century German composer, much of whose work reflects the grand Italian choral style undoubtedly arising from his frequent visits to that country and his tutelage by Gabrieli. The score for this work remained lost for many years, until it was discovered and published in 1909.

The narrative is told in a series of recitatives ascribed to a tenor soloist Evangelist, admirably interpreted by John Corbett, whose simple expressive singing was entirely in the Schutz intention where the speech rhythm of the libretto counts for a great deal in this linkman role.

The rest of the story is recounted in a series of eight Intermedia — choruses of angels and shepherds in the field, altos in three parts scored in the original for flutes and bassoon accompaniment.

Varied scoring

Indeed, a characteristic of this work is the varied scoring of the instrumental parts, and the unusual division of voices: three tenors representing the Wise Men High Priests and Scribes in four parts for the basses. Jean Samuels was excellent in the soprano solo role as the angel, and Alexander Gauld used his fine baritone voice as Herod particularly well to the accompaniment of trumpets.

The whole work was brought to a climax in robust fashion by the choir, which demonstrated it had con-

siderable resources of tone colour.

What I heard described as a "scratch" orchestra culled from a wide area acquitted itself nobly and never once obtruded upon the voice parts to disadvantage. I would rank it as one of the most effective 16-piece ensembles of its kind I have heard in this neighbourhood.

Michael Bridger welded instruments and voices into a unity in his conductor's function and also served as accompanist for certain of the recitatives though this change of role was perhaps a slight disturbance of the continuity.

After a short interval, Michael Bax took the conductor's podium to direct the presentation of 22 items from "Messiah." Handel's appealing oratorio loses nothing of its freshness or significance musically and devotionally. The Society, as a choral unit, is not matched in its male voice elements, compared with its sopranos and contraltos, in either numbers or quality.

Enthusiastic

Nevertheless, although tenors were in short supply — as in so many choirs these days — and found the tricky "For unto us a child is born"

something of a trial musically, the choir were obviously steeped in the enjoyment of their performance and conveyed their enthusiasm to all who listened.

There was some rousing singing, though at one point even this admirable orchestra only saved the day by a determined rally.

The instruments were really not very well housed in this much-loved church and suffered a handicap of insufficient illumination. With a little improvisation, St. Mary's could provide better facilities and enhance its established reputation for encouraging good music in the neighbourhood.

The principals were joined by David Burrowes, a first-rate counter tenor who sang the contralto parts with skill and confidence. This performance certainly held the attention and the choir were well served by the principals throughout.

The Society is full of enterprising spirit, typified by news in advance of its next concert, which will feature Vivaldi, Monteverdi and Faure, to which all lovers of serious music will look forward eagerly.

C.M.A.