

venue24 entertainment

The best of **British** for Choral Society concert

ST Albans Choral Society's music director **George Vass** can always be relied upon to devise interesting and challenging programmes, ranging from huge choral set pieces to new and interesting works.

The concert on Saturday night in **St Paul's Church** was by living British composers but there was local interest too in a recent work by **Alexander L'Estrange**, the 38-year-old composer living in Wheathampstead.

His And the stones sing was commissioned by George Vass to mark the 500th year in 2010 of the Flemish Presteigne Tapestry.

Singer and writer **Adey Grummet** picked up on the idea of the stones for the text from a recalled scene where Christ rebukes critics of his disciples' over-enthusiastic shouts.

The stones also represent the human dichotomy of being at one and the same time as low as the dust, but only a little lower than the angels. The idea of stones is also conveyed by the inclusion of percussion instruments in the scoring.

The tension between jubilation and doubt was immediately created by the few bars of lush string writing decreasing in volume to be followed by a spiky, pizzicato

dancing rhythm underpinning the first choir entry.

The same opening bars introduced the second section, this time with the words "and yet" becoming progressively quieter before the soprano takes up those words in a plaintive comment over the choir's background repetition of the same words.

Soprano **Charlotte Mobbs** coped effortlessly with the tricky intervals and high notes, always ending her phrases to blend in with the next choir entry.

The third section explores the dichotomy still further with a moving solo for the soprano.

Confidence and optimism were restored in the last section which reprises the first, but with final jubilation and the soprano soloist joining the choir in a final ecstatic Hosanna.

The singers are to be congratulated on coping with this unusual work which is perhaps more suited to a smaller ensemble. The composer was in the audience and acknowledged by the conductor.

Bob Chilcott's *Canticles of Light* consists of three Latin hymns from the Liturgy of the Hours.

The sound of bells evoked the atmosphere of evening, leading to the first choral entry. It is tricky making a quiet

entry sound confident but the choir coped well with the close harmony.

The soprano semi-chorus sang their plain-song in the outer sections with the unforced purity associated with young voices as was the composer's intention. There were times when the choir was in danger of being swamped by the orchestra but this was a moving performance.

Great Hills by the choir's long-term composer in association **Cecilia McDowall** which evokes the English countryside was performed with great dexterity and assurance by soloists from the orchestra.

With **John Rutter's** *Requiem*, both choir and audience were on more familiar ground. The opening cello solo to *Out of the deep* was expressively played by **Rebecca Leyton**, soprano soloist and the choir were in perfect balance for the *Pie Jesu* and oboist **Helen Barker** provided a suitably plangent solo introduction to the *Lord is my shepherd*.

The superb musicians of **Orchestra Nova** provided the instrumental ensemble and the concert was conducted by George Vass.

MARY COOK



Sasha Johnson Manning

Performance is a first

THE first performance of a work specially composed for them is to be given by **The Hardyng Choir in Harpenden High Street Methodist Church** next Saturday, November 10.

The work, **The Hardyng Season**, has been written for the choir by **Sasha Johnson Manning**.

It is in five movements – an introduction followed by music for each of the seasons of the year and set to poems by five English writers, Armstrong, Howitt, Rossetti, Keats and Shakespeare.

Sasha is a professional singer as well as a choir trainer and conductor. She has been composing music since she was a child and comments that she loves to write 'music which is fun to sing and good to listen to'.

The Hardyng Choir first met Sasha two years ago when, as a favour to a Hardyng Choir member, she took a rehearsal of *The Manchester Carols*, a work she composed in 2007 in collaboration with Carol Ann Duffy, the Poet Laureate.

Recently Sasha was commissioned by the BBC to write the music for *The People's Passion*, a work sung by choirs around the country at Easter this year.

The Hardyng Season will be performed as part of the choir's Autumn concert. The evening will also include choral works *Handel's Ode for St Cecilia Day*, *Herbert Howells' Hymn to St Cecilia* and the Autumn movement from *Vivaldi's Violin Concerto*.

The concert will be conducted by **Rufus Frowde**, musical director of the Hardyng Choir, supported by **Katherine Boyce**, soprano, **Rhys Bowden**, tenor, **Alberto Vidal**, violin, **Matthew Woodward**, piano, and **PAEAN Consort**.

The concert starts at 7.30pm and tickets are £12 and £6 for under 16s, all unreserved. For further information or tickets call 0845 475 1664.

JOHN MANNING

In the round

AN INVITATION to go Round and Round The Garden has come from **The Radlett Players** as they get ready for their next production.

They are putting on **Round and Round The Garden**, the last in **Alan Ayckbourn's** *The Norman Conquests* trilogy, at **The Radlett Centre** from next Wednesday, November 7, until Saturday, November 10.

The *Norman Conquests* focuses on three dove-tailed accounts of events at a country house over one weekend – in the dining room, the living room and, in the case of *The Radlett Players'* production, in the garden.

The house belongs to an unseen woman who is cared for by her unattached daughter and the play opens as her brother and his wife arrive to take over nursing duties.

The ubiquitous Norman causes havoc as the weekend progresses – but he only wants to make everyone happy.

Tickets for next Wednesday and Thursday are £11 with concessions £10, on Friday they are £12 and on Saturday, £13.

Lend your voice

A RECRUITMENT drive has been launched to find new singers for a church choir.

Jill Knight, choir director and organist at **Christ Church**, Radlett, is heading up the bid to recruit new singers.

Anyone who enjoys singing and would like the opportunity to sing regularly as part of a small choir is invited to come along and try it out.

The choir sing a varied repertoire of music from Tallis to Rutter, and Anglican chant to Taizé. They rehearse from 7.30pm to 8.30pm on Friday evenings in Christ Church and sing regularly at the Sunday morning Choral Eucharist at 9.15am. Once a month the choir also sings Choral Evensong at 6pm.

At 8pm next Friday, November 9, they will begin rehearsing for the Ecumenical Candlelit Carol Service organised by Churches Together in Radlett.

Anyone interested in going along is asked to contact Jill through her website at <http://www.jillknightmusic.co.uk/>

Opera doubles up

OVER the many years that I have watched performances by **St Albans Chamber Opera** I cannot remember a single failure.

Be they major productions at the Abbey Theatre or smaller ones at The Maltings Theatre or other locations, they have all been thoroughly enjoyable.

Yet last week's double bill at **The Maltings** must rate as one of the most enjoyable yet.

Featuring many of the company's regular singers, the two one-act operas, *Oberon's Birthday* and *Trial by Jury*, were an absolute delight.

The first, scenes from **Purcell's** *Fairy Queen* in a party setting, saw baritone **Des Turner** in the role of Oberon and **Jenna Clemence** as his wife with **Alex McPhee** singing the part of the maid who has caught Oberon's lustful eye.

Add to them alto **Rebecca Muhley**, **Alan French** as a drunken poet and a dozen or so other regular company members and the cast was complete.

Peter Kestner's delightful production was complemented by excellent music from violinist **Vicky Moran**, cellist **Michael Wigram** and keyboard player **Alex Wells**.

Then came Gilbert and Sullivan's gem, *Trial by Jury*.

This delightful send-up of the Victorian judicial system – and all its faults – was probably the most amusing production of the show I



St Albans Chamber Opera at The Maltings

have ever seen.

Alan French as the Judge gave a really tremendous performance, full of humour and vigour, and he was fully matched by **Warren Albers** as the defendant, **Des Turner** as the court usher and **Philip Lawford** as counsel for the plaintiff, all of whom were well supported by the members of the jury and friends of the plaintiff.

But in many ways it was **Alex McPhee** who really impressed as the plaintiff herself. The role marked her third appearance in a key role

with the company and was by far her most impressive. As a singer she is developing fast and one can only look forward to her next appearance with the company.

Producer **Paula Chitty** demonstrated how with minimal resources but good and enthusiastic performers, a really impressive show can be presented.

The pity of the whole evening was that the show ran for only two evenings. This was an event which deserved a much wider audience.

JOHN MANNING



St Albans High School musicians

School lunch at church

MUSIC scholars from **St Albans High School** will be giving the lunchtime concert at a city centre church next Wednesday, November 7.

The school has a very strong musical tradition with both instrumental and choral ensembles and many students studying music at GCSE and

A level.

The school regularly sings at the Abbey and many of the girls sing and play in ensembles both at county and national level.

The concert, which is free, is at **St Peter's Church**, St Albans and will be in aid of Grove House.

Faustian pact at Abbey

ACTOR **Timothy West** returns to St Albans to narrate a performance of **Petr Eben's** dramatic organ work *Faust* next Saturday, November 10.

The soloist at the concert in **St Albans Abbey** from 5.30pm will be the **International Organ Festival's** artistic director **David Titterington**.

Petr Eben was commissioned by the Burgtheater in Vienna to write music to accompany the Goethe play which he later transcribed for organ.

The music is a work of contrasts set around the struggle between good and evil in the person of Faust. The organ portrays the range of these characteristics by presenting the venerable, traditional style of the instrument but also by mimicking the triviality of a barrel organ.

Over a four decade-plus career, **Timothy West** has established himself as one of Britain's most versatile actors noted for his great power and command on the classical stage and on radio, film and television.

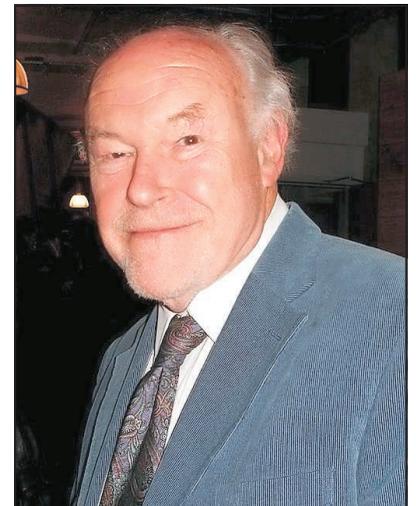
He is perhaps best known on the screen for his work as a character actor, though it is his stage performances, especially in Shakespeare, which have won him the greatest acclaim.

David Titterington is one of the world's leading concert organists. He made his debut at the Royal Festival Hall in 1986 and has since played in many of the great international festivals and concert halls.

He was appointed head of organ studies at the Royal Academy of Music in 1996 and was awarded Honorary Membership in 2008. Numerous leading composers have written for him, including Petr Eben (*Job 1984*), Diana Burrell and Lionel Rogg.

Entrance to the concert is free with a retiring collection in aid of the International Organ Festival Society.

Full details of all the concerts in the 2012-2013 series can be found at www.organfestival.com



Timothy West