

SINGING NOT DROWNING!

AMC'S 60th Anniversary Concert, Saturday March 10th

by Humphrey Burton

Aldeburgh Music Club made history at its Spring concert in Orford's beautifully flood-lit St Bartholomew's church, performing not one but two world premieres, substantial choral compositions by Elis Pehkonen and Joanna Lee in the presence of a gratifyingly large audience. Big bravos are in order for the brave decision to commission a new work to mark the club's 60th anniversary, a gesture of which Benjamin Britten would surely have approved - he was one of the AMC's founders, back in 1952, and his partner Peter Pears was the club's first president (the position I'm proud to occupy to-day). In the early days the AMC used to meet once a month for informal music-making, often at Britten's house on Crag Path, with recorder music and madrigals high on the repertoire list, but over the years the club has transformed itself into a choir, the largest

amateur group in the area, with a string of outstanding Snape Maltings concerts to its credit including - since Edmond Fivet took over as music director - *Belshazzar's Feast, Messiah* and *Elijah*.

Orford parish church, a more intimate venue, proved the perfect place to hear *Merman*, Joanna Lee's highly imaginative mini-cantata, set to a vivid libretto by Hanna Silva; it's a re-telling in four "acts" of the strange tale of the Merman of Orford. In 1167, during Henry II's reign, local fishermen caught a wild but silent man-monster in their nets. Terrified but intrigued, they lock him up in the castle, force him to eat raw fish and then torture him in an attempt to make him speak. After a while he's allowed a swim in the cold Spring sea; he manages to escape by diving deep under the fishermen's ropes and to this day they still hear his haunting screams: "he'll always be the ghost of Orford" - a distant forbear, perhaps, of another Suffolk outcast: Peter Grimes. Ms Lee, AMC's youthful composer-in-residence, devised all manner of special effects: the choir whispers to suggest the swishing of the wind and the spray of the sea, and then sub-divides to become villagers, fishermen, cooks

and narrators. The brilliant percussion delivers bone-chilling electric shocks and there are dramatic moments galore, some of them so complicated musically that the AMC had to work its socks off, laying on extra rehearsals for a month. All the effort paid off on the night: as well as the confident attack of the choir one must pay special tribute to the superb young percussionist Sam Wilson and to Maestro Fivet's powerful direction. There'll be a repeat performance next year but I rather wish they'd done *Merman* twice this time round and skipped at least one of the Haydn works also included in the programme: you can never completely take in a brand new piece on a single hearing and the concert's opener, a *Missa Brevis* from Haydn's youth, lacked any distinctive touches.

Not so the second world premiere of the evening, *Home from the Sea* by Elis Pehkonen, who despite his Finnish-sounding name was born in Swaffham, Norfolk, studied with Britten as a teenager and now lives in nearby Theberton. Taking its title from the lovely poem *Requiem*, the work lasts about twenty minutes and sets

six fine poems by Robert Louis Stevenson for baritone solo (the ever-welcome Jeremy Huw Williams, for whom the work was composed), chorus, horn, timpani and strings, an attractive and not too ambitious combination that should ensure plenty more performances, the musical language being basically tonal and tuneful with nothing too arduous for amateurs to navigate. Yet it works up to a deeply-felt final song that held the entire audience in its thrall.

Also on the bill, a charming Mozart *Divertimento* for the fleet-footed strings of the Prometheus Orchestra, led by the ever-youthful Pam Munks, the *Ave Verum Corpus* of Mozart (the choir sounding a little pale after their exertions in *Merman*) and, to conclude, Haydn's *Salve Regina*, which was pleasantly performed but provided no match in excitement or audience involvement for the new works in a stimulating evening.

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