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Review of a Choral Concert by The Tonbridge Philharmonic Society.

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St Stephen's Church, Tonbridge - Saturday 30 June 2018

The last concert in the Tonbridge Philharmonic Society's current season was given in St Stephen's Church, Tonbridge; this is a venue which is ideal in layout and acoustics for a concert such *Viva la Diva*. The programme presented a selection of well-known operatic highlights reflecting the German tradition and then, in the second half, the Italian. This format made the contrasts between the two styles apparent. The approach taken by Wagner and Richard Strauss, where harmony and orchestration are dominant and the voice becomes another, but vital, strand in the contrapuntal texture contrasts markedly with the Italian tradition of Bellini, Verdi, Puccini and Mascagni, where melody is king, and the voice is the star.

The *diva* who so splendidly triumphed in both styles was Helena Dix, whose glowingly successful career has brought her countless awards and accolades, including appearing at the Met. Tonbridge Phil. is very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with an artist of this calibre. When amateur musicians have the chance to play and sing with such consummate professionals as Helena Dix and Matthew Willis, everyone's game is raised. And this is what was apparent on Saturday. The demands of the programme, both in vocal and orchestral technique and in range of style, were considerable. The orchestra performed with a new level of confidence and expressive range, including some excellent solo woodwind playing, and the choir nobly coped with the challenges of German and Italian texts and a wide variety of singing styles, from the Humming Chorus to full-blooded Tannhauser and the Easter Hymn. Such an evening broadens the experience of amateurs and offers exciting challenges and opportunities, as well as bringing delight to the audience.

We have become familiar with Matthew Willis's total professionalism, his complete reliability in direction to encourage an amateur choir, and his highly-developed musical sensibility, which both illuminate the immediate expression of the music and also shape a longer view in the development of the musical flow. This was particularly evident in his handling of Wagner's 'endless melody' and constant avoidance of cadences.

Helena Dix brought a truly astonishing level of vocal virtuosity and a grasp of musical style, which ideally captured the essence of the national traditions which she presented to us. Her *bel canto* and command of Italian vocal ornamentation enabled us both to revel in the beauty and charms of her voice (as we are always invited to do in Italian opera), and also to appreciate the widely-contrasted emotions expressed in the selection of opera highlights programmed for us. The obvious enthusiasm of the large audience showed that we really did appreciate that we were in the presence of a very special musician. What a privilege!

On such an evening, it was easy to forget that the orchestra and choir are, for the most part, amateurs. Yes, we might have wished for more Italianate vowels from the choir, more strings in the orchestra to balance the powerful brass, a heavier double bass line, and a chorus who sang without copies so that the singers could really participate in the action; such thoughts were totally overshadowed by the conviction that we were enjoying an evening of true music-making, exhilarating in impact, yet communicating with us, in a very personal way. Thank you for a memorable evening.