**Daily Information review of ECS concert**

**[Andrew Bell](https://www.dailyinfo.co.uk/reviews/archive/user/23508/andrew-bell)** December 5, 2016

**Standing room only**

A packed St Leonard's Church, Eynsham hosted the bi-annual concert of the Eynsham Choral Society on Saturday evening. They love their music in Eynsham - the choral society is thriving, and each time I've attended an event there it's been standing room only and a bubbling atmosphere. The church with its elegant nave arcades in the style of other Cotswold 15th century churches and twin wall plaques on the west wall detailing the Ten Commandments - in case we should forget them - has good acoustics, is cosy on a cold night, and the welcome from Esme Wyatt was as cheering as could be.

The concert began with Elgar's *Serenade for Strings in E minor* from 1896, a favourite work of the composer. The slow movement seemed to me to prefigure elements in the subsequent *Enigma Variations*. Its lush chromaticism and changes of tempo found a rather hesitant performance from the little chamber orchestra of The Oxford Players. There were but 12 of them, and in this piece, sans choir, their sound was a little thin and reedy.

Then on to the first of the major works, Schubert's *Mass No. 2 in G major*.The notes reminded us that the composer was just 18 when he wrote it in the space of five days, and that it was not his first mass; an extraordinary act of precociousness. This is primarily a choir piece since, apart from some passages for the soprano soloist (Sofia Larsson, singing with plenty of oomph), the soloists' interventions are modest. Stuart Dunlop, the conductor and director of the choir, told me he's a local man who holds the post of Director of Music at the University of East Anglia. On the podium he is a delight to watch - no baton but full of urging energy, employing gestures that are always expressive and graceful.

The choir of 60, two-thirds of them women, had rehearsed for this concert since early September and now after one chord from the organ launched into the gorgeous opening bars of the *Kyrie*. The *Gloria* featured joyful declamations from the massed choir, with the *tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus* sung with real fervour, but in the Credo's *ex parte natumante omnia saecula* I thought they rather faltered on the high notes. Earlier in the *crucifixus etiam pro nobis* the orchestra, now fully warmed up, produced a fine throbbing bass line from cellos and double bass.

Vivaldi's *Gloria*was the centrepiece after the interval. The exuberance of the start derives partly because the orchestra was now bolstered by a trumpet and an oboe, and the semi-pro oboist Anne Hagyard played particularly smoothly and with fine breathing control in the succeeding *Domine Deus*, a duet between oboe and soprano, with organ continuo. The choir rose to the challenge of the tricky part-singing of *et in terra pax hominibus*, full of drama and beseeching emotion. They then ran along through the *Domini fili unigenite* with a lively, bouncy rhythm. The mezzo-soprano Frances Gregory made a fine impression in her two solos. She was noticeably comfortable at the bottom end of the register, which cannot be said of all mezzos, so I was interested to hear from Ms Gregory afterwards that she'd started life as a soprano.

The seasonal spirit was conjured up at the end in the form of Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*from 1912*,*a confection of three carols (and I thought I detected *The First Nowell* in there, too) for excellent baritone (Ed Ballard) and choir. It was good to be reminded in this season of proliferating carol concerts that carols can be put to serious musical use while reference to the time of year is maintained.

This was an ambitious and well-executed programme. Now for the Choral Society it's onwards and upwards to Mendelssohn's *Elijah*next May.