

REVIEW OF 'A NIGHT AT THE OPERA' 17th MAY 2014

by Bridget MacRae

With the early evening sunshine pouring through the stained glass windows of St James after a perfect early summer's day, the setting could not have been more perfect for Helen Grand's farewell concert conducting the Guernsey Choral and Orchestral Society's, 'A Night at the Opera', generously sponsored for the first time by Canaccord Genuity Wealth Management.

From the moment the programme began with the rousing 'Triumphal Scene' from Aida, we knew we were in for a treat! A high standard was set immediately with the wonderfully rich sound produced by the choir, both full-bodied and lyrical, supported by the tight and excellent ensemble of the orchestra, ably led by Sarah van Vlymen, which remained sensitive in its role throughout the evening.

The four purely orchestral items also enabled these talented players to display their skills as performers under the professional baton of Michael Sullivan, the orchestral conductor. Here there was some notably beautiful, sensitive string playing, several superb woodwind and brass solos, and brilliantly rhythmic playing in the necessarily diverse percussion department, one of whose versatile members also doubled up as organ soloist!

As Helen Grand explained in her warm welcome, this being her final concert after eight years with the Society, she had allowed herself to be self-indulgent and had put her favourites together, favourites that were clearly shared by the packed house at St James. From the thrilling Anvil Chorus from 'Il Trovatore' by Verdi to the sublime tranquility of Purcell's Dido's Lament, the audience's enthusiasm for her choice of programme was palpable.

Providing a platform for young local musicians has always been a notable and important aspect of Helen's work on the island. Tonight was no exception. Two young island singers had the opportunity to share the stage with the guest soloists for the concert, namely two respected local soloists, alto Tina James, long-standing member and friend of the Choral Society, and baritone Casey-Joe Rumens, and the two outstanding visiting professional soloists, Australian soprano Cathy-Di Zhang and Welsh tenor, Gareth Dafydd Morris. Hannah Wickham (soprano) and Rhian Taylor (mezzo-soprano) both contributed their talents to the evening, and rose superbly to the occasion. Being able to sing with such professionals at the top of their field is a rare opportunity for young singers, but such a vital stage in their development.

Continuing the theme of encouraging the island's youth, the evening was also much enhanced by the appearance of children from the Guernsey Music

Centre Choir in the 'March of the Toreadors' from the opera 'Carmen' by Bizet, expertly directed by Rachael Wright. Their animated faces, clear diction and concentration on their conductor was a joy to watch, and even more impressive was the fact that, while they sang in English, the adults had to sing in French!

With a combination of arias, choruses and orchestral interludes, the concert provided us with a rich variety of well known music spanning over two centuries and five countries, ranging from Purcell to Mozart, Rossini and Donizetti, and onwards through Verdi, Bizet, Leoncavallo, Gilbert & Sullivan, Puccini, Mascagni and di Capua. This meant that the choir had to deal with a number of different languages, a challenge to which they appeared to rise with great enthusiasm, and their diction was commendable.

The Choir's clear enjoyment of what they were doing was infectious, aided in no small part by the brilliance and warmth of the two visiting soloists who entered whole-heartedly into the spirit of the evening and gave us some memorable singing which will last for many years to come. Their professionalism and engagement with singers, players and audience alike took the performance higher and higher as the evening progressed, until the roof was almost raised with the bubbling Champagne Song from Johann Strauss II's 'Die Fledermaus', the closing item in this wonderful concert that brought all the soloists back on stage for one final, rousing finale.

This was one of the Guernsey Choral and Orchestral Society's best concerts ever and what more fitting way to finish for the much-loved conductor, Helen Grand.

18 May 2014