ST MARY'S CHURCH
TEMPLE BALSALL

14th February, 1987

presents

THE HAMPTON SINGERS

FRANCES HOOK - Soprano
NIGEL ARGUST - Organ
ANDREW DICKS - Conductor

PROGRAMME

MAGNIFICAT..... Antonio VIVALDI (1676-1741)
O LITTLE ONE SWEET..... Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)
THE THREE KINGS..... Peter CORNELIUS (1824-1874)
HEAR MY PRAYER..... Felix MENDELSSOHN (1809-1847)
CANTIQUE DE JEAN RACINE..... Gabriel FAURÉ (1845-1924)

INTERVAL

THIS HAVE I DONE FOR MY TRUE LOVE.... Gustav HOLST (1874-1924)
EX ORE INNOCENTIUM ..... John IRELAND (1879-1962)
AIR AND GAVOTTE ..... Samuel WESLEY (1766-1837)
THE SILVER SWAN .....Orlando GIBBONS (1583-1625)
MY SPIRIT SANG ALL DAY ..... Gerald FINZI (1901-1956)
INSIDE THE BAR ..... Edward ELGAR (1857-1934)
JOHN PEEL ..... arr. Andrew DICKS

"MAGNIFICAT" - Vivaldi

This was written for the girls at the Pieta in Venice, which was an orphanage whose inmates were trained to a high degree of musical accomplishment to enable them to sing for their supper, in a manner of speaking.

The manuscript exists in three different versions, as Vivaldi adapted his works (as was then customary) to suit the talents and resources at his disposal for different performances.

For the final version, he wrote five new solos for five of the girls at the Pieta: a light-hearted poem of the late 1720's tells us that Apollonia had a clear soprano voice and was an expert at both pathetic and lively singing; Maria La Bolognesa had a pleasing voice but tended to inaccuracy, while Ambrosina had a deep voice and sounded like a tenor, and indeed, her aria is written in the tenor clef. This version is normally performed with two soloists - one soprano endeavouring to combine all the virtues (but none of the deficiencies) of the original singers, and a contralto with a flexible and strong chest register.

On this occasion, the final version (RV 611) is used, with two exceptions: "Esurientes Implevit" is taken from the first manuscript (RV 610) and "Sicut Locutus Est" from the second (RV 610a) - a lively and florid 3-part chorus, lady tenors being in short supply! Nonetheless, the combination of virtuosic arias, and choruses both solemn and lively, make this Magnificat a splendid example of the variety inherent in so much of Vivaldi's best music.

"O LITTLE ONE SWEET" (O Jesulein Süss) - Bach

By the time Bach arranged and harmonised this tune, Protestants had adopted it as part of their heritage, without, however, eradicating its Catholic characteristics - it remained Mary-centred and in the lullaby-carol tradition. Only the tune was modified slightly between its first publication in 1623, and its second, in 1650: the rough edges had softened. It is this version that Bach would have learned in child-hood, and which has passed down to us today in his setting.

"THE THREE KINGS" - Cornelius

Cornelius composed mostly vocal music of one sort or another; he originally wrote this as a solo song with accompaniment for organ or piano, but we have become accustomed to the arrangement for solo baritone and eight-part choir by Sir Ivor Atkins. The accompaniment consists simply of Philipp Nicolai's great chorale of 1597, "Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern", and the solo part is a recitative woven around the chorale.

"HEAR MY PRAYER" (Hör mein Bitten) - Mendelssohn

Despite the popularity and attractiveness of this motet for soprano, choir and organ, especially in this country, few biographers think it significant enough to merit even a passing mention. It was completed in 1844, and published initially in Cologne without any English text underlay. The German words have more "bite" than the English words we are accustomed to: the latter can lead to performances of sentimental insipidity whereas it can be a powerfully emotional and dramatic work.

"CANTIQUE DE JEAN RACINE" - Fauré

This was Fauré's first real success as a creative musician, but it very nearly failed to be. During his final year at music school, the pupils were invited to compete for a prize in composition. The teachers chose a poem by Racine, with both Latin and French text, and decreed that the Latin text was to be set. Fauré, however, was determined to use the French text, and initially the examiners refused to listen to his work. Fortunately, on the insistence of his accompanist, no less a person than Saint-Saens, they agreed to give it a hearing - and promptly awarded him the prize.

In this instance, composer and poet were a perfect match. Racine's poetry exemplifies the "clarity of thought, sobriety, and purity of form" that Fauré espoused - classical virtues that must have seemed old-fashioned in the middle years of the Nineteenth Century; but any associations of aridity implied by the use of classical forms (and their concomitent limitations) must be dispelled by the gentle warmth with which he suffuses the venerable and ancient images and phrases of the Catholic Breviary glowing though Racine's verses.

I N T E R V A L

"THIS HAVE I DONE FOR MY TRUE LOVE" - Holst

Holst was very enthusiastic about amateur music-making; he started to conduct choirs at the age of 17, and later organised an informal festival for amateur choirs and orchestras at Thaxted in Essex, near his home. His friendship with Vaughan Williams inspired a strong interest in English folk music which transformed his way of setting words to music. He wrote this song for the Thaxted Choir in 1916, and considered it to be his best part-song; years later, and fittingly, it was chosen to be played at his funeral.

It is an elaboration of an old Cornish carol; carols were originally dances, and this demonstrates its provenance by allegorising faith in terms of joining in a dance with God (c.f. "Lord of the Dance" - modern words to an old Shaker tune which draw upon the same analogy). Furthermore, a startling and unconventional device enables the meaning of the poem to strike home in a direct and powerful way: Christ speaks to us in the first person in terms of a love-song. Unusually for a carol, the Birth is celebrated only in the first stanza. Each of the following verses give a sharp account of the salient events of His life, reaching a climacteric in the Crucifixion verse, and then drawing back a little for the account of the Resurrection in order to reach a triumphant and radiant conclusion in the Ascension verse.

"EX ORE INNOCENTIUM" - Ireland

Performed as a solo tonight, this was originally written for treble voices for the founder of the Royal School of Church Music, Sir Sidney Nicholson. It was intended for performing during Lenten services, and like the preceding piece by Holst, uses a simple model - in this case, a children's hymn. Given the source of the commission, it is necessarily more conventional, but is no less attractive, and gives a good example of Ireland's style, which may perhaps be more familiar in the famous song "Sea Fever".

"THE SILVER SWAN" - Gibbons

This is one of the best-known of English madrigals and appears in numerous anthologies. It is written for five voices, but it is believed to have been originally intended as a viol-accompanied solo song, a postulation supported by the prominence of the soprano part in pointing the moral of the dying swan's last and only utterance.

"MY SPIRIT SANG ALL DAY" - Finzi

Gerald Finzi was born into a well-to-do Jewish family; he never studied music formally, but instead had private lessons over a number of years. He had an introspective and reflective nature, and as soon as he could, he retired to live in the country, first in Gloucestershire and later near Newbury. Free from outside pressures, he devoted his energies to composing - a few choral pieces, but mostly songs - in the thirties, the song recital became a primary vehicle for serious musical purpose. His seclusion firmed up his inclinations towards agnosticism and pacificm: he served the war effort from behind a desk in London; He also formed a chamber group in Newbury to keep music alive, and gave the citizens of Newbury oases of peace and beauty amidst the drabness and discomfort: much the same as provided by the warmly-remembered lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery in London, albeit in a more rarified way.

He was drawn to poems by intensity of feeling and directness of expression, and was less concerned with detailed word painting in the manner of lieder than in the broad strokes of light and shade and rhythm - capturing the essence of the meaning in musical terms: desolation in the hollowest of tones, and fullness of emotion in the brightest of climaxes. "My Spirit Sang All Day" was composed to verses by Robert Bridges as part of a song cycle set to music between 1934 and 1939. It is a part-song typical of his style, and in which any preciousness in the lyrics is offset by the sweep and vitality of the music.

"INSIDE THE BAR" - Elgar

The story of this song for four baritones is disproportionate in relation to the length of the song itself, but it is a charming tale, though with something of a "shaggy dog" air about it!

In early 1917, German submarine warfare destroyed so many ships that the United States was compelled to declare war on Germany, just in time, as the troops had exhausted themselves on the Western front. Nonetheless, the killing and maiming continued more frightful than ever, as the German weaponry increased in horror and effectiveness. Elgar's feelings had up to this point been complex, but the escalation of the carnage, and the loss of many friends and colleagues in action, led him to bury his feelings in work, finally concluding the last part of "The Spirit of England", called "For the Fallen", setting it to the Demon's music from Gerontius.

As well as honouring the dead, there were the living to be entertained, especially the troops home on leave, in cheerful and patriotic revues and shows in London and the provinces. In 1916, Sir Charles Beresford asked Elgar to set to music some of Kipling's verses, recently published, which drew breezy pictures of the life aboard the small commercial vessels now mounted with guns, patrol boats in outlying waters, and submarines, as a tribute to the lonelier and less glamorous "fringes" of the Navy. Elgar set the verses to hearty tunes for baritone and men's chorus, but Kipling suddenly withdrew permission for his verses to be used for musical entertainment as, since he had written them, his only son had been reported missing in action. Elgar dropped the project, but after some months had passed, Kipling was persuaded to acquiesce to the use of his poems, which were now more topical than ever on account of the increased submarine warfare.

Elgar completed the music for the series of four songs in what he described as "a broad saltwater style" and Oswald Stoll of the Coliseum immediately signed it up for a fortnight's run as part of a variety bill in June, 1917. The setting placed the four singers in fishing boots and sou'westers, sitting round a table outside an idyllic English country inn to sing their songs of coastal defence. It was such a success that after a provincial tour the run was extended to December.

On 4th July, the whole cycle was recorded by the singers, under Elgar's baton, and Elgar added a fifth song at this point, to words by Sir Gilbert Parker, "Inside the Bar", a sailor's yearning for safe harbour and an inn and his girl. Elgar dedicated it to the four singers, Charles Mott, Frederick Stewart, Harry Barratt, and Frederick Henry: the last-named, and youngest of the four, was inspired by this happy experience to pen some Kiplingesque doggerel verses in his own tribute to the enterprise, which conclude:-

"And all the time he's one of us,
to work with him's a treat;
So God bless the splendid skipper
Of the 'Fringes of the Fleet'!"

"JOHN PEEL" - arr. Andrew Dicks

John Peel was a Cumbrian farmer who would down tools at the drop of a hat for the sake of a good hunt: only his death at the age of 78 put a stop to his obsession. He hunted on foot, with his own pack of hounds - whose descendents form the present pack. His colourful and eccentric character won him fame all over England and inspired a hunting friend, John Woodcock Graves, to write a poem, the choirmaster of Carlisle Cathedral providing the tune.

It is said that the men of the 34th Foot (subsequently, the Border Regiment) whistled the tune as they helped the cavalry prepare for what was to become known as the Charge of the Light Brigade, and it is today the Regiment's official march.

A keen disciple of Ligeti, Stockhausen and Luigi Nono, our conductor alleges that he composed this arrangement to fall well within our capabilities and so show the choir off to best advantage, whereas we maintain that he wanted to demonstrate some extremely esoteric principles of harmony, and provide a challenge of the greatest difficulty for singer and listener alike.

Teasing aside, he cleverly makes use of every trick in the book to give variety to a very jolly but repetitive tune - deceptive starts, giving the tune to different voices, extremes of tempo and dynamics, humming, for example - as well as a little spice in the harmony!