

## Cockermouth Harmonic Society

### 'As You Like It' - Swing with Shakespeare

January 2020

The repertoire in this welcome winter concert was varied, wide-ranging, ambitious and often musically challenging in that it explored the jazz genre, one not often associated with choral singing. The musical challenge was, however, one to which the choir, together with its musical director, accompanists and soloists readily rose.

The evening opened with 'Music to Hear', arrangements of Shakespeare's sonnets and words by George Shearing. The small alto section opened the work in a beautifully controlled way. The richness of Shearing's harmonies, and the obvious influence of certain English composers, perhaps Delius in particular, gave the choir ample opportunity to explore the unusual chordal voicings which would become more prominent as the work progressed.

'Shall I compare thee' was very modal in feel, with interesting rhythmic passages allowing interplay between the choir and the accompanists. Shearing's first love, jazz, became more evident in 'Sigh no more'. The choir responded enthusiastically to the 'swing feel' set up by the accompanists, and clearly enjoyed negotiating the complexities of jazz harmony effortlessly – the added sixths, ninths, flattened fifths and so on posed no problems whatsoever! The final number in the suite, 'Blow, blow thou winter wind' was introduced with a heavily syncopated riff from the piano and double bass, lending energy to the choir who performed with obvious enjoyment and great precision.

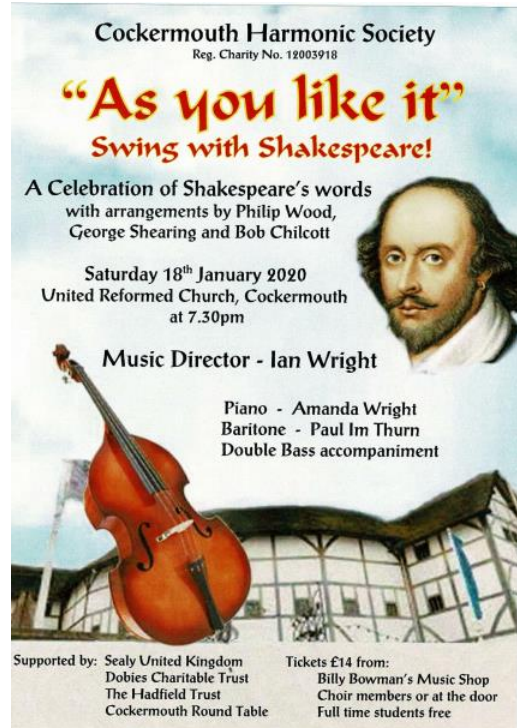
The audience was now treated to more Shakespeare settings by a range of contemporary composers and arrangers. 'Touch her soft lips' was a gorgeous arrangement by Bob Chilcott of Walton's music from the 1944 film 'Henry V', directed by and starring Laurence Olivier. The performance was smooth, expressive and beautifully phrased. The basses brought out a lovely interrupted cadence, adding a fleeting tension to an already heart-rending piece.

This was followed by an interesting setting of 'Shall I compare thee' by local composer and former choir member, Douglas F Cook. The choir gave a thoroughly spirited and accurate rendition of this piece.

The choir's director, Ian Wright introduced the idea of two 'bonus tracks', not on the programme. The first of these was an improvised performance by local jazz pianist, Stan Foster who gave a wonderful account of Shearing's 'Lullaby of Birdland' demonstrating the locked hands, block chord technique which Shearing made his own. During his improvisation Stan segued into another number from the jazz standard repertoire, 'Green Dolphin Street' before returning to the original theme.

The bass soloist, Paul Im Thurn was now called upon for 'Five Shakespeare Songs' by another local composer, Philip Wood. The 'Bacchanale' began in a suitably boisterous style, introduced confidently by the tenors and basses. The 'Burlesco' was similarly rollicking – a drinking song, interpreted very well by the soloist, with some amusing spoken passages. The 'Festivo' was very energetic and demonstrated some excellent use of dynamics – two very pronounced 'sforzando – diminuendo' phrases, extremely well executed, giving power and drama to the huge crescendo ending.

The second half of the concert opened with four more well-chosen Shakespeare settings by contemporary composers. There were many 'stand-out' moments; in particular the dynamics and phrasing in 'I know a bank where the wild thyme grows' (Sarah Quartel); the treatment of the luscious harmonies in 'It was a lover and his lass' (Will Todd); the smooth, flowing singing in 'The Bird of Dawning' (Bob Chilcott) with a beautiful



Cockermouth Harmonic Society  
Reg. Charity No. 12003918

## "As you like it" Swing with Shakespeare!

A Celebration of Shakespeare's words  
with arrangements by Philip Wood,  
George Shearing and Bob Chilcott

Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2020  
United Reformed Church, Cockermouth  
at 7.30pm

Music Director - Ian Wright

Piano - Amanda Wright  
Baritone - Paul Im Thurn  
Double Bass accompaniment

Supported by: Sealy United Kingdom  
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Choir members or at the door  
Full time students free

soprano solo soaring above the other voices; and the rocking, expressive, berceuse-like feel of 'Sigh no more, ladies' (Cecilia McDowell).

The second 'bonus track' gave us Paul Im Thurn in fine voice, performing two very contrasting settings of Shakespeare by Roger Quilter, 'Come away, death', and 'It was a lover and his lass'. These showed Paul's vocal and interpretive technique to full effect.

Finally, we heard George Shearing's 'Songs and Sonnets', written fifteen years after 'Music to Hear'. The wit and technical expertise of Shearing's writing shines through in these pieces, and the variety of interpretations required was met very successfully by the choir. 'Live with me and be my love' was graceful and light, and the choir breezed confidently towards the 'jazzy' ending – a fairly complex chord with added sixth and added ninth (and this was just one of many complex chords heard throughout the evening's performance). The 'lover and his lass' made their third appearance of the evening, with the choir beginning in unison then bursting forth exuberantly into a wonderful block chord a few bars in. This set the tone for the remainder of the piece – technically challenging and great fun.

'Who is Silvia?' is one of the loveliest settings that Shearing wrote. The tone and balance was wonderful, the choir singing smoothly through the long phrases, and using dynamics most effectively to bringing out the plaintive nature of the words.

'Fie on sinful fantasy' was a brilliant contrast to the preceding number, the piano and bass making the most of their triplet figures to drive the choir on in this dramatic, forceful short piece.

Altogether, this programme was ambitious, technically demanding and utterly delightful. Once again, under the skilful direction of Ian Wright the choir has taken on a significant challenge and risen to the occasion. The accompanists, Amanda Wright (piano) and Donald Scott (double bass) provided a precise, professional underpinning to the programme whilst taking in their stride the diverse idioms in the evening's repertoire and conveying a great sense of fun particularly in the up tempo numbers.