

MUSIC IN HERTFORDSHIRE

# Gabrieli Magnificat at Stevenage

by Arthur Peters

STEVENAGE Choral Society's programme had to be re-arranged at the last moment when the music of the advertised Byrd Mass failed to arrive, and the adjusted programme had, albeit unavoidably, a curiously lop-sided look about it. The result, however, justified the change, for the evening proved to be both rewarding and absorbing. Taking part in the concert, as well as the choir, were the Hertfordshire Trombone Quartet, and the recently formed Stevenage chamber group, the Granby Players. The accompanist, from time to time, was John Anderson.

A Magnificat for twelve voices in three choirs by Andrea Gabrieli, the elder and less famous of the Venetian family opened the programme. Gabrieli, like Monteverdi, wrote for St. Mark's in Venice, of which he was organist, and one can readily imagine these sublime harmonies swirling around those painted galleries and warm darkened chapels, stealing out from the darkness like celestial music. In the less ornate and considerably colder nave of St. George's, Stevenage, the magic remains and with the acoustics on the side of the choir, lyrical moments lingered perceptibly before - one cannot conceive of them dispersing - being absorbed in the memory.

Robert Davidson, together with the Trombone Quartet then took part in a lament by Schutz "Fili mi Absalom." and his fine bass voice blended with the mournful, sad, beautiful chords - fanfares to death - almost too well. All the trombones sounded for Absalom on the other side, and grand, impressive stuff it was,

but one would have liked to hear Mr. Davidson rather less accompanied. The trombone quartet were equally effective later on with another lament "In Memoriam," which again brought out the sadness of which these noble instruments are capable.

The Granby Players in the Mozart Clarinet Quintet in A played as well as their recently acquired, but rapidly growing reputation had promised. As the soothing, matchless strains of the opening statement stole along the nave, the audience relaxed, and familiarity with perhaps a rather more than usually critical ear took over. There were occasionally ragged moments, but if, as seems to have been the case, the chamber group was filling in the space left by the cancelled Byrd Mass, then it filled in splendidly, and gave an extremely good performance. Certainly the clarinet can rarely have been heard to greater effect than upon this occasion, when the high arched roof and the stonework brought out a richness of tone as delightful as it was unexpected.

The choir, however, after its success with the Gabrieli Magnificat was supreme on this occasion, and one was impatient all the time, to hear it again. Four delightful "Songs of Springtime" by an almost contemporary composer. Ernest Moeran (1894-1950) had a curiously old-fashioned folk-cum-madrigal flavour about them, and the fact that they were comparatively fresh to most of the audience added to an attraction that was enhanced by the discipline and purity of tone of the choir.

Kodaly is, of course, known best perhaps for his championship of Hungarian folk music, echoes of which underline much of his best known music. Both he and Bartok set about to strip away the distortions of gypsy bands which composers have exploited, in ignorance of the authentic folklore that their folk music contains. In "Scenes from the Matra district" which abounds with peasant dances and merrymaking, there runs a story, the words and gist of which could not be captured, but the choir was so obviously having a good time that the audience reaction was spontaneous and memorable.

The concert finished with a Handel anthem "The King Shall Rejoice," and what better way is there to finish a concert. After a sparkling piano introduction, the full and satisfying harmonies of this coronation anthem filled the church and rounded off a rewarding evening to everyone's satisfaction.