

Days of old when night was cold

Newbury Chamber Choir and Orchestra, at St Nicolas' Church, Newbury, on Saturday, November 28

PURCELL's setting of Dryden's *King Arthur* story is set in an indeterminate historical period between Saxon times and the late 17th century and performed by six soloists, a small orchestra and chorus.

Three cheers for Newbury Chamber Choir in making this complex piece come alive and providing more than two hours of entertainment under their indefatigable conductor Edward Lambert. Arrayed in a rainbow of shirts, they sung with enthusiasm and conviction, and provided some colourful battle noises and cheers when good defeated evil, twice in the same evening.

Don Crerar's declamatory narration opened the performance in a most engaging style but, unfortunately, the other soloists simply read their parts from a script. In Purcell's time, two performers represented each character,

one to talk and one to sing, and this may well have been more effective than combining roles.

The singers didn't seem very comfortable with the semi-dramatisation and the space limitation and evening dress didn't help. For example, counter-tenor Stephen Harvey, as a rather stiff King Arthur, seemed totally unperturbed in the capture of his sweetheart Emmeline by the evil Grimbald, and upon her eventual escape and their reunion, he forgot to look at her, let alone smile. The soloist did sing beautifully, with some wonderful interpretations of the music, but you needed to be in the front half dozen rows to hear properly.

I particularly enjoyed act three, where that dastardly Grimbald woos his prisoner Emmeline, while Merlin tries to remove the

spells from the enchanted forest enclosing Grimbald's castle. There was hilarity in his unlikely seduction technique and the stuttering vocal lines to portray chilly weather, but this didn't stir the audience as perhaps one would have hoped. If Saturday night's weather had been a bit better and the church a little less chilly, then maybe the audience would have been bigger and more easily moved to laughter.

The Newbury Chamber Orchestra did very well with this highly-charged and complex music and delivered some excellent playing, in both the accompaniments to the singing and the scene-setting dances and entre-acts. The recorder duets and bass playing were particularly fine.

CATHERINE SIDE

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