

A FESTIVAL OF CAROLS

As the choir will be issuing a CD for Christmas it reminds one that they made a record on vinyl to celebrate Christmas 1978, 25 years ago, in which they packed in a remarkable amount of music under the above title. There are still two members of the choir from that time, Malcolm Brown and Simon Jarvis, and the conductor was the present Organist Emeritus, Michael Bailey, who studied under Dr George Thalben Ball. Boys constituted the junior section then but this section was opened to girls within the next decade and our present organist's daughter, Rachel Spencer, finished as head chorister.

The mixture of familiar carols with pieces that are in small circulation makes this record of remarkable interest. Well known carols, including one by a great poetess - perhaps our greatest - Christina Rossetti, are included. Her poetry was astonishingly varied and she lived in London for most of her life of sixty-one years, the latter part spent in nursing a sick mother.

The record starts with a fine French traditional carol 'Whence is that goodly fragrance flowing?' and is followed by two tunes from Piae Cantiones, 1582, 'Good King Wenceslas' and 'Up good Christian folk, and listen.' There is a fine melody and words also from Piae Cantiones, 'God is love', an unusual carol arranged by Gustav Holst.

I shall never forget how magically evocative the words of the third and fourth lines of Christina Rossetti's carol struck me:

**"Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone"**

The economy of words is Shakespearean. But every word of 'In the bleak midwinter', beautifully sung by the way, is inspired, and some passages could surely only have been written by a woman:

*"Enough for him, whom cherubim
Worship night and day,
A breastful of milk
And a manger full of hay."*

In the last verse Christina Rossetti's devotion expresses itself in the superb phrases:

*"What can I give him
Poor as I am
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb:
If I were a wise man
I would do my part
Yet what can I give him?
Give my heart"*

Only one word in these eight lines has more than one syllable yet Blake never wrote words more compelling as it is so truly English that it rivals his 'Jerusalem' and brings Christ Himself to our own doorstep.

This last carol was preceded by a ballad/hymn by Charles Causley, who has just died this November aged 86. Called 'Three Masts', the music is by Christopher Field who had sung in the choir since he was a boy. Christopher Field also composed the music for a late 15th century work 'Welcome our Messiah'. 'The Truth sent from above' and the familiar 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' are both arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was a close friend