

Hiawatha a choral feast

THE ROYAL Tunbridge Wells Choral Society made the Assembly Hall reverberate on Sunday with the exciting and distinctive sound of Coleridge Taylor's three-part cantata *Hiawatha*.

It is a rarely heard work these days and with apparently no current recording available.

Under the experienced baton of their musical director and conductor *Derek Watmough* the performance was vibrant and full blooded, yet sensitive to the many-faceted emotional content of Longfellow's hypnotically rhythmic poem of American-Indian life.

The subject inspired Coleridge Taylor to marshal orchestral forces of Wagnerian proportions. Ideally it would have demanded a truly vast choir to do it full justice, but that is more than ordinary choral societies can muster and may be one of the reasons why the work seems to be out of favour.

For the choral society to have revived it again after 20 years was highly praiseworthy and worthwhile, for *Hiawatha* has an undeniable and even exotic appeal. It was written over a period of three years when the composer was in his early twenties and it left one wondering what he might have achieved had he not died in 1912 at the early age of 37.

Part one describes *Hiawatha's* Wedding Feast with rousing rhythmic tom-tom beats, with carousing and dancing and storytelling. It also contains the famous lyrical tenor aria, *Onaway, Awake Beloved*, sensitively sung by Robin Green.

Part two, *The Death of Minnehaha*, depicts the desolation of winter, sickness and famine and finally death. In part three, *Hiawatha's* Departure, *Hiawatha*, no longer sorrowing, prepares to leave for his final journey westwards to the Islands of the Blessed.

The bright warm tone of the choir was a pleasure to hear, and if the words were not always clearly distinguishable that was no fault of the choir, whose diction was meticulous, but numerically they were underpowered against the orchestration.

Still, it sent me straight to the book and also made me wish I could hear the work again. The orchestra, led by Jane Pamment, gave a sparkling and crisp performance.

Among the able soloists the baritone John Morgan (*Hiawatha*) was outstanding not only for the beauty and richness of his voice but his intelligent use and control of it. Soprano Michele Roszak's voice had sweetness, but as yet lacked sufficient power and support to sustain the necessary focus.

It was a thrilling and enjoyable experience which left one drained of emotion.

Marlis Evans