

## SHOWTIME

# Snowdrift heroics

BEFORE SINGING a note, two of the four soloists booked for a performance of Verdi's Requiem by the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society in the Assembly Hall on Sunday received a well-deserved round of applause.

Local tenor Richard Braebrook and his colleague, the bass singer Anthony Cunningham, were trapped in a snowdrift on the M6 on their return from a concert engagement in the north of England, and had to spend the night in their car.

They arrived in Tunbridge Wells with only three hours to spare, much to the relief of the society's secretary, Len Lee.

Showing no sign of their ordeal and their lack of rehearsal in no way evident, they were both in good form and gave strong performances.

Richard Braebrook, who lives locally and has appeared on a number of previous occasions with the choral society, has a fresh and natural English tenor voice in the Richard Lewis tradition, which is a joy to hear after all the Italian 'can belto' we have heard recently.

The effortless way in which he floated his voice into that large auditorium, not always sympathetic to a solo singer, was quite admirable — as, for example, on the word 'Hostias' in the Offertory, in which he

was accompanied by some beautifully sustained pianissimo playing from the orchestra.

Anthony Cunningham was no less effective. That so rich and powerful a bass should emerge from so slender a frame is remarkable. He has a consistent quality of tone over a wide compass, as he demonstrated in Mors Stupebit and, again in Confutatis. Like Richard Braebrook he is a member of English National Opera, and is now firmly embarked on a distinguished singing career.

It might be less than gallant to suggest that neither the soprano nor the mezzo was at her best on this occasion. Perhaps there was too much work in rehearsal, or perhaps the excessive heating in the Assembly Hall, welcome as it was to members of the audience, took an unkind toll.

The pure, clean tone of Heather Lorimer's soprano voice was not heard to best advantage, nor did the unusually rich, dark mezzo voice of the New Zealand singer Marion Olsen come across with the power it clearly deserved. As a result, the Angus Dei was a disappointment, although some fine singing from the chorus, whose articulation was exemplary throughout, carried the day.

Good as the chorus was, even they could scarcely be heard in the repeated Dies Irae passages. But if you engage all the woodwind, brass and per-

cussion Verdi specified, you have to let them play.

The trumpeters were not banished to the back of the hall for the Tuba Mirum as sometimes happens, but stayed in the band under the benevolent eye of conductor Derek Watmough, while in the percussion section the double-headed bass drum was thumped with such venom that it seemed likely to fly off its stand at any moment.

The great fugue in Libera Me was skillfully negotiated by singers and players alike.

After a brief interval the chorus sang Benjamin Britten's Ceremony of Carols, with Pauline Rogers providing the demanding harp accompaniment. It was a fitting choice by the choral society, now celebrating its 87th season, not only for the time of the year, but also because it needs trained amateurs of their calibre to do justice to works of this kind. Traditional carol concerts can be safely left to other, lesser choirs.

Robert Hardcastle