

Works make a pleasing double bill

By W. L. Hoffmann

MUSIC

The Llewellyn Choir - *Cantatas by Prokofiev & Walton*. Llewellyn Hall, August 25.

IT IS GOOD to see Canberra choral societies getting away from a pervading 18th-19th century focus in their programming, and on Saturday night The Llewellyn Choir enterprisingly presented two fine 20th century choral works that made a very pleasing double-bill.

The singers were accompanied by the Canberra Chamber Orchestra, its numbers supplemented by members of the Royal Military College Band to provide the solid orchestral support both these compositions demand. And under the firm direction of conductor Richard McIntyre the performances commendably realised the differing yet complementary expressive

content of these two works. Prokofiev's cantata *Alexander Nevsky* grew out of the film music he had written for Eisenstein's 1938 epic film on the 13th century Russian hero who defeated the invading Teutonic Knights in 1242.

It tells the story in seven movements, with choral depictions of the events alternated with programmatic orchestral interludes.

The performance opened a little tentatively with the *Song about Nevsky*, with the singing lacking somewhat in the necessary incisiveness. But the conductor soon drew a crisper response from the singers in the hymn-like invocation *Arise, ye Russian people*. And the central *Battle on the Ice* was well expressed by the orchestra,

the musical picture of the mist on the lake through which the Teutonic Knights advance to battle being effectively realised and rising to an exciting climax.

The mezzo-soprano solo in the regretful *Field of the Dead* as a girl seeks for the body of her lover among the dead following the battle was movingly sung by Maria Danielle-Sette, while the final anthem of joy received a confidently spirited performance.

Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* made a memorable impact on British choral music when it was first heard in 1932, and it can still make a powerful effect as this performance showed.

Choir and orchestra are equal proponents in a dramatic telling of the biblical story. Happily Saturday night's presentation captured much of the essential spirit and exuberance of the music. Once again, the singing in the opening

chorus *By the waters of Babylon* was too tentative, but soon grew in confidence, with the scene of the great feast of the King, and the invocations to the heathen gods, being strongly projected.

Walton's scoring for the scene of the writing on the wall is highly original, and it was realised with notable effect by the orchestra, while the final scene of the jubilation of the Jewish captives was suitably exciting.

A notable plus for the performance were the contributions of the baritone soloist, Leon Warnock, his singing resonantly projected and delivered with excellent diction.

But why, I must complain again, when the printed program gives the words of choral works so they can be followed by the audience are the lights in Llewellyn Hall always turned down so that this is quite impossible to do?