

## A SHAKESPEAREAN CONCERT

Birmingham Bach Choir at CBSO Centre



Concerts with a Shakespeare theme are everywhere at the moment. This one, though, was the real deal, as it focused almost entirely on the Bard's words sung and spoken; and even the notable exception – Britten's Choral Dances from *Gloriana* – qualified as a tribute of sorts in the Queen's 90th birthday year.

Conductor Paul Spicer knows how to instil confidence in amateur singers, so programmed these difficult songs first, followed by Vaughan Williams' equally demanding *Three Shakespeare Songs*. Such consideration seemed hardly necessary: both sets were performed by Birmingham Bach Choir with tremendous cohesion, vivid dynamic contrasts and, notably in the bell-like resonances of VW's 'Full fathom five', considerable delicacy.

These words re-appeared in the *Shakespeare Songs* of William Mathias, again with bell effects, though expressed quite differently. Hearing this weighty eight-movement suite sung and accompanied (by pianist Ben Kennedy) so well was a welcome reminder of Mathias's inventiveness as a choral composer and the attractiveness of his music.

Not so Sven-Eric Johanson, whose two sets of *Fancies* displayed a journeyman technique of imitative phrases and contrapuntal entries that often bore little relevance to his chosen texts.

For sheer enjoyment the jazz-inflected, crossover style of the five songs in George Shearing's *Music to Hear* took some beating. It may have been alien territory to the choir but they took to it like troupers, oohing, aahing and humming with the best of them.

The second, consistent pleasure was Juliet Stevenson, who spoke extracts from the plays and sonnets with lucid elegance and a refreshing absence of actorly preening. Some were unexpectedly funny, too.

Repeated (with Anton Lesser) on July 2 at Stratford ArtsHouse.

David Hart