

# Celebration of excellence

FORTUNATELY moments of musical excellence are not all that rare in St Albans but even so Saturday's concert in **St Albans Abbey** had more than its share.

Much of the outstanding success of the evening can be credited to the outstanding performance of the **Hertfordshire Classical Orchestra** and fine soloists including violinist **Ellie Fagg** and sopranos **Elizabeth Cragg** and **Frances Bourne**.

But equally the Harpenden-based **Hardynge Choir** and the **Aeolian Singers** from Hemel Hempstead can feel proud of their joint performance, particularly in the main work of the evening, **Mozart's Mass in C Minor**.

The concert opened with **Haydn's Te Deum for the Empress Maria Theresa** where the joint choir's performance was adequate, but, for me, lacked some definition, a situation which certainly did not apply in the Mozart Mass.

Although the work, which like Mozart's *Requiem*, was left incomplete, relies heavily on the soloists and

in particular the sopranos, the choral parts are not without their difficulties which the members of the two choirs handled with relative ease to produce a glorious sound.

But the two sopranos and Elizabeth Cragg in particular were, together with the orchestra, the real stars of the performance. The highlight for me was the outstanding final part of the Credo when the first soprano, in this case Elizabeth Cragg, sings what is virtually a duet with various individual instruments in the orchestra, in particular a trumpet.

This is a section which calls for musicianship of the highest order, not only from the soprano but also from the individual orchestral musicians

Perhaps unsurprisingly from an orchestra packed with some of the country's finest specialist period musicians the result was spectacular.

Unfortunately for the other two soloists and bass **Edward Grint**, their parts in the work are extremely

small and give little chance for them to show their abilities.

Between the two choral works was a performance of Mozart's *Violin Concerto No 5 in A Major* by Ellie Fagg, one of the most popular of St Albans' own "home-grown" musicians.

She brought tremendous freshness to a well-known work and demonstrated a real partnership with the orchestra. Once more she gave a thrilling, delightfully played and well-thought-out performance which brought a huge and well-deserved response from the audience.

But one of the stars of the evening was conductor **Stephen Jones** who clearly demonstrated his understanding of the music. In particular during the concerto his attention to detail and ability to work closely with his soloist was a lesson in how the conductor's role should be approached.

**JOHN MANNING**