

extraordinary lengths to outdo each other, the prize, according to MacDougall, going to the second violins for their extravagant costuming as characters from *The Nutcracker*.

If the sound of children singing is the genuine Christmas article, we had it in spades from the RSNO Junior Chorus, with Bob Chilcott's animated *Hey! Now*, and the group version of *Singing in the Air* a sport of the orchestra's perennial live screening of Howard Blake's *The Snowman*.

As for us, a quick *Twelve Days of Christmas* and *Hark the Herald*, and we were off with plenty good cheer.

KEN WALTON

At Glasgow Royal Concert Hall tonight

MUSIC

SCO Chorus Christmas Concert

Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh

★★★★★

SCO Chorus Director Gregory Batsleer wanted his ensemble's Christmas concert to become a fixture in the Scottish capital's season calendar, a must-see Christmas event, he said in these pages last year. With its first scheduled concert quickly selling out, and a

hastily added second doing the same just as speedily, it looks like he's succeeded.

But despite the concert's nods to Christmas favourites – a tender, careful *Rocking Carol*, a velvety, caressing *Away in a Manger*, a supple *In the Bleak Midwinter* – what really impressed was Batsleer's overall conception for the evening.

His first half – performed straight through, with no applause, he requested – alternated movements from Rachmaninov's *Vespers* with seasonal songs from across Europe, some familiar, others less so. His second half brought in more challenging works by Pärt and Tavener, nestling among Tchaikovsky and Grieg.

The result was a deeply rewarding, absorbing evening of music, immaculately judged in its shifting moods and perspectives, and one that provided – as Batsleer also said he hoped – a time for reflection amid the pre-Christmas hubbub.

The SCO Chorus singers were on breathtaking form – rich and resonant

in the Rachmaninov movements (though, perhaps inevitably, somewhat light in the composer's abyssal basslines), swelling with emotion in Tchaikovsky's *The Crown of Roses*, superbly balanced in the restlessly changing textures of Grieg's *Ave Maris Stella*.

As the Chorus encircled the audience in Greyfriars Kirk for a surround-sound account of Tavener's brief but potent *Hymn to the Mother of God*, it felt like a grand but also touchingly intimate climax to a thoughtful, thought-provoking evening.

DAVID KETTLE



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