

## 1967 SONG OF NORWAY DREW PACKED HOUSES

### *East Surrey Operatic's outstanding production*

It says much for East Surrey Operatic Society's reputation that every seat for the whole week was sold before the rise of the first night curtain at the Market Hall, last week. "Song of Norway", a colourful production of the life and music of Edvard Greig – reaching its climax in the majestic piano concerto – is a testing show for an amateur society. It makes big demands on the vocal powers of the lead parts and the chorus, and relies to a great degree for its success on the chorography and execution of both Norwegian national dancing and classical ballet. In all these respects the producer, Elsie Rendell, was astonishingly well-served, but it was her own sheer professionalism that welded the company's talent into a colourful, flowing production in which music, action and story became one absorbing whole.

Andrew Glass played the baritone of Greig with the strength and confidence we have come to expect from him, and coped convincingly with the long miming sequence at the piano during the concerto. This difficult work was in fact played by Staley Nightingale whose obviously well rehearsed performance combined a delicacy of touch with a fine attack that made it one of the highlights of the show.

Parts like that of Louisa Giovanni, the operatic prima donna, seem to be specially written for Molly Greaves. She excelled in the role which curiously brought memories of her performance in "The Merry Widow" and "Pink Champagne". At that time a previous critic wrote that she has the "magical quality of stillness". To this must be added that she lost none of the sweetness of control of neither her voice nor the ability to make the most of her stunning gowns in commanding and dramatic entrances.

The part of Nina usually has to be overshadowed by the stronger characterisation of Louisa, but Joyce Gascoine-Pees combined sympathy with a tenderness of interpretation that entirely captured the audience.

Sympathy was the keynote of the interpretation of the role of Rikard Nordraak, the poet played by a newcomer to the leading roles in the East Surrey production John Parker. This is not an easy tenor role even for an experienced player and special credit must be awarded to John Parker for the warmth of his performance, coping well with some difficult musical entrances in which he appeared to have little help from the orchestra.

The difficulties of the score are by no means confined to the lead parts, and the chorus rose splendidly to the occasion particularly with the soprano song "Now" and in a most moving interpretation of the "Hymn of Betrothal". This polish and unity must have been the result of many months of concentrated rehearsal.

Without relying on heavy make-up Gillian Evans, as Mother Grieg, assumed the mantle of age in poise, subtle mannerisms and voice. This was a good

characterisation but the greatest impact was made by Michael Macdonald as the florid and extrovert Italian impresario. He squeezed the last ounce of amusing vulgarity from the part that offered no opportunity to hear the richness of his singing that audiences have enjoyed so much in South Pacific last year. Fred Harrison was a distinguished and elegant Count Peppi, extracting a great deal of humour from his Gallic exaggerations, and Douglas Chantler, as Father Grieg, led him delightfully into drinking excesses without overplaying his hand. Malcolm Howe provided an excellent foil in the part of Tito, and although he showed himself to be agile, it was an interpretation that successfully substituted a sense of comedy for the more orthodox dancing one expects from this character.

A great weight of responsibility falls on the dancers, and particularly the choreographer, and the society is fortunate to have the talent of Shirley Knoght for the arrangement of the dances, the training of the dancers and for her own delightful performance. With Angela Terribile as Angelina, the temperamental ballerina, this produces a formidable dance team that few amateur societies can match. One felt, however, that they deserved a bigger stage than the Market Hall offers. In an excellent corps de ballet, two opportunities for solo dancing provided by the parts of the Spirit of Norway and the Spirit of the North Wind, were beautifully interpreted by Penny Lambert and Wendy Bicknell.

Supporting parts were played by John Rapley, Eugene Crawley, Sheila Carley, Robert Cosser, Barbara Allen, Joan Passingham, Gillian Jarvis, Sionne Carden, Sheila Macdonald, Godfrey Hill, R. Conybears, Penny Lambert, Wendy Bicknell and Anne Spurrett.