

1969 Summer Song

East Surrey Operatic's Colourful Summer Song

Gillian Jarvis and Tony Williams-Pugh a great duo

A colourful spectacle and fine ensemble singing, two of the main ingredients of any good musical, were brilliantly presented to appreciative audiences for five nights last week in East Surrey Operatic Society's gay production of "Summer Song". It proved to be an ideal successor to last year's more rumbustious "Kiss Me Kate". In this delightful story of an imaginary journey by the composer Anton Dvořák to America, the cast vividly brought to life all the humour, the drama and the pathos in which Dvořák found inspiration for his New World Symphony.

Not only does this call for great skill from the producer Elsie Rendell, who surpassed herself, but it was a great challenge to the musical director, Christopher Slater, who succeeded in coaching the singing of both chorus and principals to the pitch of perfection and conducted a fine orchestra who did credit to the difficult music and indeed would have shone in the more glamorous surroundings of the West End.

Names familiar to East Surrey audiences featured in the production, notably Molly Greaves, who portrayed Karolka with a professional warmth and sincerity and sang exquisitely such lovely numbers as the title "Summer Song". Effervescent performances came from Gillian Jarvis in her first big part as Millie, and from her partner Tony Williams-Pugh in the role of a travelling salesman. This was a swinging partnership that really swept the show along. Gillian Jarvis has certainly developed greatly both as a singer since her small part in last year's Kiss Me, Kate and it was delightful to see Anthony Pugh-Williams, a young newcomer, grab with both hands all the opportunities to make the most of some humorous situations and to provide a lively foil to Millie.

Singing honours went also to Frederick Harrison. This is not the first time he has played a negro part, as those who saw him in Show Boat will remember, and it is easy to understand why. He interprets beautifully the rich vibrant bass tone called for in negro folk music, particularly in the melodious "Deep Blue Evenin'". Jack Parker played the romantic lead with sincerity and sympathy. He was at his best in the tuneful "Be she dark, be she fair", accompanied by the chorus.

A show of this nature depends not only on the quality of the singing, but on the quality of the acting. Notable characterisations came from Joan Passingham who made a considerable impact in the portrayal of an Irish inn-keeper, and from John Rapley, who played Dvorak with the utmost conviction and a strong sense of humour.

Choreography was again by Shirley Knight and to describe her work as professional is no overstatement. Not only did she produce a rewarding spectacle in the attractively dressed and beautiful ballet sequences, but she danced one of the parts at a moment's notice when illness struck one of her dancers, competently backed by Penny Lambert, Angela Terribile, Ann Spurrett, Ann Greaves and Karan Walford.

Godfrey Hill has some amusing moments as one of the Czech immigrants, and it was refreshing to see such competence in the smaller parts, notably Andrew Glass as Barstow, Malcolm Howe in a clever dual characterisation as Tomasshek and Feeney, Douglas Chantler also in the two roles of Gilmore and Jake and the two reporters, played by Maurice Fisher and Denis Pratt, who made their marks even though the parts were apparently too small to be noted in the programme. Other parts were played by Jon Fallon and Anthony Terribile. Superb chorus singing added the final touches to a most enjoyable production.