

## 1975 The Merry Widow

### *Melodious 'Merry Widow' has everything*

Melody, drama, humour, suspense colour – you name it – it was all there at the Market Hall last week when the East Surrey Operatic Society presented "The Merry Widow" to capacity audiences. Rex Baines (producer), Christopher Pratt (musical director) and an amateur cast which proved itself brimming with talent from chorus member to principal, from sophisticated waltzers to brash and exciting can-can dancers provided a feast of nostalgia and gaiety, and, to quote one of the audience as they were leaving the theatre " ... a wonderful evening out!"

Last produced in Redhill fifteen years ago, Lehar's operetta is musically demanding. Christopher Pratt conducted sensitively and obtained remarkable flexibility, yet was always in control. The orchestra responded well and proved to be one of the most pleasing I have witnessed at these shows for a long time. Would, though, that it were possible to increase the size of the string section to add warmth and sonority. It was a pity, too as seemingly is so often the case that the audience regarded the overture, which was finely played as background to conversation

As the final curtain opened to reveal a colourful tableau it was a certainty that enjoyment was in store. Andrew Glass beautifully characterised the imposing Barn Zeta and seemed to steer the course of the evening with accustomed certainty and conviction. But the line up of principals was by no means a row of familiar personalities. There was a most noticeable contribution from Paul Weakley, who displayed great potential vocally in the part of the lovesick and often confused Camille. Patricia Felstead as Valenciienne taunted him beautifully and gave a nicely even performance, though her vocal timbre was rather lacking in beauty for some numbers. Of course, humour had its part in the evening, and Philip Felstead was a fine clownish Njegus with beautiful judgement and timing.

A relatively insignificant yet nevertheless memorable moment was Virginia King's enchanting portrayal of the deluded Praskovia, and the frequent appearances of the bickering duo St Brioche and Cascada, played by Leonard Headde and Frederick Harrison respectively were intensely sustained. The entrance of the Merry Widow herself, up to which the first few moments of the operetta build was visually effective but aurally disappointing. Entering from upstage the acoustic was such that the voice was smothered. However after this initial setback, ;Alison Cooper, in the title role, proved a most engaging and entrancing Anna with .a small but sweetly placed, if not always sufficiently projected voice.

The men's chorus was convincing, if a little animal, in its herd-like clamouring for Anna's attentions in Act I, and its reactions to the various situations almost assumed the character and flavouring of a Walt Disney cartoon! John Fallon's Danilo was rather unlyrical, perhaps a little lacking in that carefree nonchalance that is to be expected of one who can spend 20 millions with ease but "earn it - never!" But his relationship with the widow was always sensitively judged.

The vocal chorus ensemble was firm and bright and it was good to see principals from past years contributing in this respect, and a very pleasant surprise to hear "Vilia" sung true to form by Molly Greaves, recalling memories of the 1960 production in which she took the leading part.

Six youthful dancers, trained by Shirley Knight and Penny Lambert lent exquisite charm with, their poise and expertise. How they managed to perform the can-can with such professionalism, energy and abandon within such a confined area still fills me with astonishment, as did the whole evening with admiration for the entire cast; and the production skill of Rex Baines.

R,G.