

## **PULSES RACING AT MATTHEWS HALL, TOPSHAM**

If you like to see youth, beauty, professionalism, musicality and sparkling stage presence, and you didn't turn out to see the performance of Carmen at Matthews Hall on 25th July, then I'm sorry to report that you missed a rare treat.

Miranda Lisk and Brendan Ashe, a couple who until recently were both teaching music at St. Margaret's School, Exeter, have put together a group of excellent musicians under the name of Bacchanale, who stage regular concerts in the South West. For Carmen, they added in five professional young singers, including some of Miranda's former pupils, whose modest goal for the evening was to present an abridged and semi-staged version of Bizet's popular opera. Brendan had arranged the work for only six instrumentalists, whilst Miranda had written linking passages explaining the story, which she narrated herself when not conducting.

The energy of Miranda, the players in the little orchestra and the young singers was exhilarating and infectious. Katie Bray, who took the title role, is an exciting actress and singer who created a passionate and manipulative Carmen. Her clear singing voice and fresh approach, and that of the two other young women who made up the cast - Elizabeth Drury (Micaela) and Charlotte Wimshurst (Mercedes) - were invigorating : how often in this part of the world does one get to see opera in which those playing the beautiful young characters are genuinely beautiful or young? Their voices, too, had the crisp clear quality of youth - seemingly effortless pitching and quick, artless movement up and down the range.

The young men, too, were not only good-looking but also fine singers. New Zealander Andrew Sritheran created a noble and tragic Don Jose for us, while James Cleverton's Escamillo nearly blew some of Topsham's more mature ladies out of their seats with his lascivious and spirited rendition of the Toreador's Song. Hearts were palpitating wildly and the theme of love was eminently believable by the time we reached the finale!

Don't cry if you missed this performance, however. Bacchanale will return to Topsham before long, and in the meantime you could travel up to the village of Halse, near Taunton, if you want to hear their instrumentalists in concert there on 4th October, or their Christmas Concert in the village church on 6th December. For more details contact Tim Payne on [info@bacchanale.co.uk](mailto:info@bacchanale.co.uk).

Lily Neal