

**Tonbridge Philharmonic Society      Review by Sara Kemsley**

*Carmen by Georges Bizet*

**Saturday 1 July 2017**

Matthew Willis is an adventurous conductor for the TPS. He is constructing a journey, which is taking this already good amateur society and its audiences to new territory with well-judged steps. This first outing into a semi-staged performance of an opera, in a church building, could have gone haywire on many counts. That it didn't - on the contrary it was extraordinarily exhilarating and moving - is testament to his skills and the performers' growing confidence in their abilities together.

The deliciously open space in St Stephen's Church, with mid-summer sun flooding down through the columns and wooden vaulting, conjured up Moorish Seville for Bizet's tragic tale of scornful love. A capacity audience was able to watch from three sides the carefully staged presentation. The orchestra unusually was all at ground level. The three soloists had the raised church steps on which to tell their tale. The chorus was raised up on professional staging to maximize their ability to be seen and heard and to join in with the action. With minimal props and colourful shawls, the ladies sounded, as well as looked, like young cigarette girls and gypsies. The men portrayed the soldiers and smugglers with enthusiasm, if at times sounding more Gilbert and Sullivan than Andalusian!

From the moment of Hannah Pedley's first sultry entrance in high-split evening dress and vocal score in hand, we were lost to the sex-fuelled, dust-filled atmosphere of Seville. This was a Carmen you could believe in; she fairly ripped Don José's heart from him with her beauty, her voice and her taunts. Anthony Flaum as Don José was less experienced but he brought great fervour and resonance to his part and filled the auditorium with his passion and his conflicted emotions. The third soloist, Tristan Hambleton, played two roles: Captain Zuniga and Escamillo. His skilful vocal qualities, aided by a subtle change of jacket, were enough keep us very clear on who was who. By the by, whoever was responsible for the cut-down version of this opera did a cracking job. It is so well-known but not for a moment did I feel the lack of detail or characters. The orchestra contributed really well, although at times the tuning was not up to the usual standard. The players barely skipped a beat in handling all the subtle and quick changes of an operatic score and delivered the many set pieces with verve.