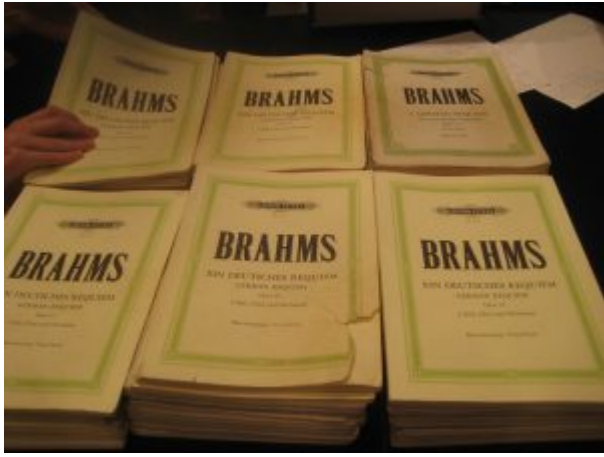


How amiable are thy tabernacles ?

22 May 2024



Jane Pickles reviews Saturday May 18th's Ashtead Choral Society concert at St Martin's Epsom.

If you live in north Surrey, you are lucky to have such a busy and vibrant music scene with so many concerts given by so many different groups at so many different venues.

Quantity is one thing but Ashtead Choral Society's Brahms concert on 18 May in Epsom highlighted the sheer quality and professionalism we also have available locally. Kent Sinfonia set the tone for an emotional evening with Brahms Tragic Overture. From Dr Andrew Storey's first down beat we knew that the orchestra was as one in committing to Brahm's journey of light and dark. Being a church St Martin's does not have great sight lines for all seats, but the monitors allow the audience to observe up close what is going on, and it felt like Storey was able to give Kent Sinfonia space to play stepping in to only to encourage and finesse at key moments.

That brought us to Brahm's German Requiem. We knew Kent Sinfonia were up for a night of high emotion, and the choir were not to be outdone with their first haunting 'Selig sind' (blessed are they) which developed into two wonderfully evocative movements delivered by choir and orchestra. The well-known second movement - 'Denn alles Fleisch ist wie Gras' (All flesh is a grass) - was delivered with purpose building to promised 'joy and gladness'. Talking of quality, it was good to see the baritone, Daniel Tate, and soprano, Eleanor Pennell-Briggs back in Epsom for this event. Tate's appearance saw him work his intonement, 'Lord, make me to know mine end', building with the orchestra and choir to a long, glorious final fugue from Storey into which players and singers flung themselves.

After a welcome glass of wine, the choir eased us back into Brahms' journey with the motet-like 'How amiable are thy tabernacles' before Pennell-Briggs gave us the comfort promised by the fifth movement with mesmerizing tenderness and simplicity. Tate's return portended more drama, and the choir did not disappoint with cries of 'death where is thy sting?' from which Storey set up a triumphant 'Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power.' This might have been a fine hopeful and triumphant end to the work, but Brahms gives us a final seventh movement ending as he starts with a reprise of the tender 'selig sind' motif from which Storey eased us to final 'rest from our labours' as Brahms' epic melted into peace.

ACS is commemorating Remembrance Day in Epsom on 9 November and I have no doubt their assembled forces will provide another great evening of quality music with their programme of Hadyn's Nelson Mass and Faure's Requiem.

Jane Pickles

Related reports:

Ashtead Choral Society give a lesson in three Rs

Ashtead Choral Society celebrated Surrey's Vaughan Williams.

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Spanish fiesta came to Epsom

22 May 2024



Epsom Symphony Orchestra - Epsom Playhouse - 4th May - Review by Sarah Haines.

What an uplifting and colourful music evening put on by Epsom Symphony Orchestra. Their May concert at Epsom Playhouse was a rich and colourful Spanish Fiesta overseen by Musical Director and Conductor Darrell Davison.

A wonderful start to summer with its promise of outdoor living. Our party had pre performance tapas and spirits which nicely set the stage for what was to come. Chabrier's Espana captured the Spanish way of life in music. Full of character, and contrasting themes including parts that were really powerful and tempestuous. Elsewhere light and springy with happy harp playing. Ending in fantastic fanfare.

Turina's Procession of the Lady of the Dew was a charming little piece: a fantastic soundtrack to a fiesta in Seville. We listened to music from a procession - sedate and respectful; building to a joyful and jubilant end: trumpets playing the Spanish national anthem - this one really was like a film score overture.

Richard Scholfield then treated us to two wonderful pieces playing the solo saxophone (supported by the Orchestra). The first was Ravel's Pavane (arranged by Darrell Davison) - a slow Spanish dance. This was superb playing - soulful and light, a silken sound, romantic, demonstrating the repertoire of the saxophone.

The second was Borne's marvellous Fantaisie Brillante on Themes from Bizet's Carmen - a demanding soloist piece played beautifully and with flair - it was phenomenal, at times racy, playful, a powerful Tango, rapid scales with wonderful percussion joining at the end. At points it was like listening to a horse race.

The second half began with de Falla's Three Cornered Hat Suite 2. This piece depicted melodies from cafes, bars and street musicians. A throbbing intensity from the cellos and double basses interspersed with movements of lightness from the violins and violas and augmented by colourful music from the brass and woodwind. This really caught the essence of Spanish life.

Rimsky-Korsakov's Capriccio Espangnole was joyful piece: containing two morning songs, a gypsy song and a Fandango (animated Spanish dance). So many wonderful solo parts throughout the orchestra as they played this colourful piece.

The concert ended with the unforgettable Ravel's Bolero - an extremely popular piece. The familiar tune gradually built and built as more members of the orchestra came in. Two snare drummers stood like sentinels either side of the stage, reminiscent of Torvill & Dean's legendary gold winning ice-skating performance at the Sarajevo 1984 winter Olympics.

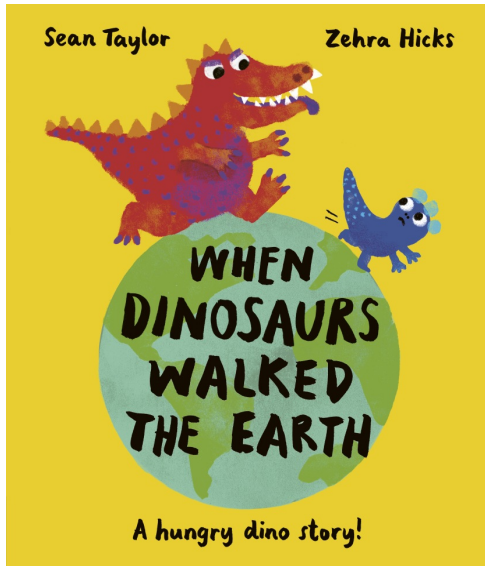
Sarah Haines

Walking with dinosaurs ... not quite

22 May 2024



Epsom-based **Zehra Hicks** is an award-winning children's book author and illustrator whose books have been translated in over 20 languages. Through her work, she shows the magic of storytelling to children through her comical illustrations, which has led to an already impressive list of accolades, including being highly commended for the Macmillan Prize for Illustration and winner of the Heart of Hawick Award, to name a few.



When Dinosaurs Walked The Earth, authored by Sean Taylor and illustrated by Zehra, is one of five shortlisted books for this year's £10,000 **Oscar's Book Prize**. Founded in honour of book-loving Oscar Ashton who passed away aged three and a half from an undetected heart condition, the prize seeks to find the best children's picturebook, and is supported by **Amazon** and the **Evening Standard** with Princess Beatrice as a patron. The winner will be announced at a ceremony in central London on the 7th May.

Zehra is a tutor at Chelsea College of Arts, where she completed a short course in Book Illustration in 2009.

Since then, she has been highly commended for the Macmillan Prize for Illustration, winner of the Heart of Hawick Award, named Lovereading4Kids Debut of the Year in 2011 and shortlisted for the Read It Again! Cambridgeshire Children's Picture Book Award.

About Epsom Zehra told the Epsom and Ewell Times: "I moved to Epsom from London 14 years ago when I was pregnant with our second child. For quite a while I missed living London, but now I definitely have the best of both worlds. I feel incredibly lucky to be living in a town with so many open green spaces like Epsom Common and Epsom Downs, yet only being a 35 mins train ride away from the capital.

"I love going for daily walks with my sausage dog, Vincent. Sometimes I even run with him. I'm much more likely to come up with book ideas on a walk or run than stuck behind my desk! And I love bumping into people for little chats. Being an author and an illustrator can be quite lonely, and I find Epsom residents and dog walkers so friendly.

"I work in cafes too, so although some people may think there are too many cafes in Epsom, I happily make use of them ALL! You may often see me in Gail's or D's Coffee House with a sketch book working on new ideas. I love the buzz in cafes - it helps my creativity, and I love that there seems to be more and more residents working in cafes, creating a lively working community."

"Having an art shop and bookshop is a huge benefit to me too, as is the market. It would be lovely to have some more independents though. A few are cropping up, but very, very slowly!"

Image: Zehra Hicks and her sausage dog on Epsom Common

Music for our times

22 May 2024



Shelagh Godwin reviews last Saturday's Epsom Chamber Choir concert at St Martin's Church.

Imagine writing a piece that means a lot to you and then never hearing it performed. This was the fate of **Maximilian Steinberg's** Passion Week. Composed in the 1920s just as the Soviet regime was banning any religious music, the piece was published in Paris at the behest of the composer in 1927, and scores eventually made it to the United States, but it was not until 2014 that a complete performance and an award-winning recording took place. It has had its enthusiasts since, one of whom, Epsom Chamber Choir's conductor Jack Apperley, presented a performance on Saturday 23rd March in St Martin's Parish Church in Epsom.

Based largely on Russian Orthodox chants, Passion Week could not be more different from the sacred music composed by Steinberg's contemporary and fellow-student Igor Stravinsky. Indeed, it draws more from the influence of his father-in-law Rimsky-Korsakov. It is more reflective in mood than Rachmaninov's more celebrated Vespers, and the stepwise movement of Orthodox chant pervades the work and the general mood. The texts are Church Slavonic hymns for Holy Week, and are reflective tableaux rather than narrative. The eleven sections tend to sound somewhat the same, but there are great moments, enhanced on Saturday by the Epsom Chamber Choir's well-co-ordinated ensemble and effective use of excellent soloists from within the choir. Like much Russian choral music of the time, it abounds in low notes for the basses, who dealt with that challenge magnificently.

Interspersed with the hymns of Passion Week were the five deeply moving spirituals from **Tippett's** A Child of our Time, which received superb and moving performances from the choir.

A more unfamiliar interjection was **Owain Park**'s Phos hilaron (Hail gladdening Light), a complex setting of psalms and Greek liturgy. I say complex because it was very difficult to follow the words! It did achieve the desired effect, as did the extremely evocative encore, **John Rutter**'s heart-rending Prayer for Ukraine, sung in Ukrainian. Entirely appropriate in view of the tragedies of the previous few days.

Shelagh Godwin

Ashtead Choral Society give a lesson in three Rs

22 May 2024



Jane Pickles reviews a concert given by the Ashtead Choral Society in Epsom's St Martin's Church on Saturday 16th March that included works from Rameau, Rossini and Rutter.

I don't know about you, but when I open my Spotify application to listen to music I am immediately drawn to the familiar where one finds comfort and pleasure. The glory of this programme was to take the audience on a spiritual journey from the less familiar Catholic Baroque to the well-known glory of the modern English church tradition.

You will find it difficult to find a recording of **Rameau**'s Blow the Trumpet. One wonders why as this joyful opening set the scene invigoratingly for the evening, bringing together the full forces of choir, organ and soprano, Helen Pritchard. If you were at the last ACS concert, you will have enjoyed the rich, operatic dramaticism of **Rossini**'s Petite Messe Solennelle. This time we were treated to three of his glorious motets in the same vein, with Musical Director Dr Andrew Storey making the most of the sacred setting and acoustic of St Martin of Tours and the powerful shifts in expression offered by Rossini.

Helen Pritchard's solo performance moved us firmly into the early 20 th century with a rare opportunity to experience Vierne's Les Angelus song cycle in which John Carnelley's shimmering organ playing underpinned Pritchard's effortlessly lyrical appeals to the Virgin Mary. This set the scene for another rarely heard classic: the intense homophonic simplicity of Gorecki's incantation Totus Tuus. Storey created and sustained a mesmerising soundscape, still yet kinetic, and crowned with a resounding silence at the end of this evocative chant to the Virgin Mary.

Faure's Pavane and Cantique de Jean Racine brought us back to the familiar and foreshadowed the last stage in the evening's journey, **Rutter**'s well-known Requiem. Rutter went to France to view the original manuscript of Faure's Requiem before he wrote his own, and Storey illustrated exactly why Rutter's offering is a modern classic.

The choir dealt purposefully with the anguished chromatic calls for eternal rest that open the work, before resolving into the simple, lyrical beauty of Rutter's requiem theme. In the psalm setting movements - Out of the Deep and The Lord is My Shepherd - the choir shifted seamlessly from simple lines shared between the parts, to glorious harmonies and well-delivered choral recitatives. Pritchard gave us grace and purity in Rutter's Pie Jesu, soaring to heaven and back again from the pulpit.

Storey gave a blazing Sanctus, an Angus Dei which tore at the heartstrings as he drove a crescendo of pleas to the Lamb of God from choir, and, finally, resolution and rest through the spare lines of the Lux Aeterna.

All in all, tour of Europe, a tour of musical epochs, and a tour for the soul. Storey must have tours on his mind as he mentioned that ACS will be taking much of this repertoire on tour to Italy later this year. Bravo!

Jane Pickles

Photo Credit: Sue Weeks.

A concert of English music in Epsom

22 May 2024



Peter Lutton reviews a concert given by Epsom Choral Society of English music conducted by their Musical Director, Julian Collings. The concert took place Saturday 9th March at St Martin's Church, Epsom.

The concert opened with Elgar's The Spirit of the Lord, the atmospheric opening to his oratorio The Apostles, contains several themes heard throughout the work. There are one or two tricky moments but it is very direct in its unison passages and with its majestically long melodic line. The choir ensemble throughout was good and the climax was very effective, Elgar's word setting allowing real clarity of text. Just occasionally I felt that a little more support in the choir's breathing would have lifted the line, but this was a strong start.

John Ireland's Greater Love Hath No Man again has a strong melodic line and clear presentation of the text. The opening tenor line was well projected with a good vocal blend and it was encouraging to see a choral society with a healthy number of men, some younger - one or two of the latter watching the conductor assiduously. Only once was the ensemble not quite together but the early climax was powerful and was particularly dramatic as it subsided. The Soprano solo was excellently projected and well balanced by the Baritone. The change of tempo was smooth and the build up to the choral climax suitably staged. The arrival at the final climax was very effective, followed by a well-supported soft closing section, though I would have liked to hear more bass in the final bars. The emotional circumstances of this work's early performances (during and after WW 1) resonate today as much as ever and this presentation was in the best English tradition.

Herbert Howells' Like as the Hart is one of four small-scale anthems written in war time when he directed the reduced forces of the chapel music at St John's College, Cambridge. The tenors and basses produced a warm sound at the start and the first tutti was suitably intense. A few more consonants from the sopranos would help in the acoustics of St Martin's but the Piu Animato went well as did the climax on 'Where is now thy God?' The Tenor and Bass were better supported than

the Sopranos but the latter handled very well the demanding descant which accompanies the return of the opening material. Bliss indeed was the final tutti with its ecstatic solo Soprano, followed by the atmospheric ending. A memorable performance of a great piece, an all-time favourite of your scribe.

Gerald Finzi’s Lo the Full and Final Sacrifice is a work on a much greater scale. After the organ introduction (full marks to the organist, Peter Jaekel, as this is a demanding piece on any instrument) the first choral entry was excellent despite a hint of flatness at the end of the section. Again, we have a piece where the words can be heard and understood – we heard them clearly. Though the next entries were exposed, they were confident and accurate, not least the altos with the low start. While the G flat section wobbled slightly, the Soprano entry with (another) big tune was very clear and confident as indeed were the following entries, though the unison on ‘Help, Lord’ was less united. But these are small points; the performance conveyed the rhapsodic nature of a musical style very suited to the metaphysical poets, not least in the climax on ‘Lo the Bread of Life’.

The final work, Stainer’s ‘The Crucifixion’ of 1887 has, as the programme helpfully noted, had its ups and downs. Stainer had rebuilt the reputation of St Paul’s Cathedral Choir; in ‘The Crucifixion’ he encouraged the grass roots of Anglican music.

This performance did full justice to this piece. The soloists gave us the lines with simple directness, as did the choir in its first entries outlining the drama of the scene in the Garden. John Findon sensitively sang the tender solo that provided relief before the final tutti section. The recitative which covered the crucifixion itself was clearly given – the soloists were consistently top-class and the solos which followed kept up the intensity, especially in ‘King ever Glorious’. John Findon was very impressive at every level – I have not heard it sung better.

In the final chorus the pent-up tensions of the drama found release, in the brisk tempo and strong dynamic contrasts. There was some lack of clarity in the short ‘Crucify!’ shouts but we got the point. The final pages were well shaped, as well as being tender and dramatic in equal measure and having an effective ending, even though it was pianissimo.

Though we all know the end of the story, it still has the power to move, as this performance of the final recitative and semi-chorus proved. The well-known final hymn leaves us with the hope for the future even though Easter is not mentioned. It was clear that the choir had really enjoyed the whole dramatic progression; the audience certainly did.

Peter Lutton

Arts plan to surprise Surrey and nation

22 May 2024



In a bold move to redefine Surrey’s cultural landscape, a comprehensive strategy and vision for the years 2024-2034 has been unveiled by The Surrey Cultural Partnership (SCP). The “Surprising Surrey: Cultural Strategy & Vision 2024-2034” outlines an ambitious plan to transform Surrey into a vibrant hub of creativity and innovation, celebrating its rich heritage and fostering community prosperity.

Epsom and Ewell Times summarises the highlights:

Vision for 2034:

The vision for Surrey by 2034 is one of confidence and vibrancy, where the county’s cultural heritage and creativity are celebrated as cornerstones of individual and community wellbeing. Key objectives include improving access to creative experiences, fostering cultural engagement across demographics, supporting creative practitioners, attracting visitors, and boosting investment in cultural activities.

Cultural Strategy Highlights:

The strategy underscores the belief that culture is integral to societal well-being, offering benefits such as enhanced quality of life, improved mental health, and economic growth. It aims to address existing disparities in cultural access and investment across Surrey, recognizing the county’s diverse needs and potential.

Challenges and Opportunities:

Despite its affluent reputation, Surrey grapples with pockets of deprivation and underinvestment in cultural infrastructure. The strategy highlights the urgent need to secure funding and support from both local and national stakeholders to address these challenges and realize its goals.

Priorities and Action Plan:

The strategy outlines four key priorities: ensuring culture is accessible to all, fostering resilient communities, enhancing county-wide cultural infrastructure, and supporting creativity as an economic driver. An action plan details specific initiatives, including the establishment of cultural hubs, support for creative enterprises, and community engagement programs.

Monitoring and Financial Implications:

To ensure accountability and progress, the Surrey Cultural Partnership (SCP) will monitor the plan’s implementation and evaluate its impact through key performance indicators. Financially, the plan anticipates a requirement of approximately £2 million over the next decade, to be sourced from various public and private funding channels.

Next Steps:

SCP will establish a steering group comprising stakeholders from diverse sectors to oversee the plan’s execution. Additionally, workshops will be conducted to recruit Culture Champions and mobilize community support for the initiative.

The unveiling of the “Surprising Surrey: Cultural Strategy & Vision 2024-2034” marks a significant step towards transforming Surrey into a dynamic cultural destination, where creativity thrives, and communities flourish.

Surrey University’s Professor Caroline Scarles, Professor of Technology and Society, School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Director of Visit Surrey, said: “It has been a privilege to work with the Surrey Cultural Partnership to develop this strategy that brings together the wide range of vibrant and inspiring cultural leaders, organisations and communities across the county. It is a strategy that has the collaborative voices of the cultural sector as its very foundation. It provides the collective voice and vision for capturing the diversity, drive, and ambition of the county and recognises the central role that culture plays not only for the economy but also for inclusion, diversity, health, and wellbeing.”

English music for Lent in Epsom

22 May 2024



Stainer’s The Crucifixion is a classic of the Victorian era which is still loved by church choirs and choral societies. It tells the story of Christ’s Passion with compelling arias and dramatic choruses, as well as moments of reflection, such as the anthem, “God So Loved the World.”

The work features in Epsom Choral Society’s spring concert at St Martin’s Church Epsom on Saturday 9th March. The programme showcases some of the most celebrated English anthems of the twentieth century. In Elgar’s “The Spirit of the Lord” the Apostles tell of their calling to preach the Gospel, while Ireland’s transcendent “Greater Love Hath No Man” and Howells’ haunting “Like as the Hart Desireth” offer evocative interpretations of biblical texts. Finzi’s “Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice” is a poignant reflection on the communion gifts of bread and wine, in the words of the 17th-century mystic poet Richard Crashaw.

Isobel Squire, Chair of Epsom Choral Society, expresses her excitement for the event, stating, “We are thrilled to offer balm for the soul with an evening of glorious English choral music. Whether or not you are a believer, the soaring melodies and gorgeous harmonies of these wonderful settings of sacred texts are guaranteed to uplift your spirit.”

Epsom Choral Society is delighted to welcome back esteemed international soloists John Findon (tenor) and Jon Stainsby (bass), alongside organist Peter Jaekel, for what promises to be an unforgettable evening of musical inspiration. Music Director, Julian Collings, said: “The five works chosen for this concert revolve around the Lenten themes of preparation, waiting and penitence. From John Stainer’s gloriously Victorian depiction of the events leading up to the Crucifixion to the emotional intensity and heartfelt intimacy of the music of Herbert Howells and Gerald Finzi, this concert presents some of the best and most moving music from the English Choral tradition.”

Tickets for “English Music for Lent” are available online at <https://www.ticketsource.co.uk/epsom-choral-society/t-moaqzdo> or by phone at 01372 727078.

Tickets are priced at £20 in advance or £22 on the door. Admission is free for attendees under 18 years of age. Each ticket includes a complimentary programme and a glass of wine.

Little Solemn Mass

22 May 2024



Ashtead Choral Society – Petite Messe Solennelle by Rossini. 4 November 2023 at St Martin’s Church, Epsom. A Review.

Rossini’s singular foray into large scale religious choral composition, his ‘Small, Solemn Mass,’ is neither particularly solemn and certainly not small. Composed in 1863, more than three decades after his last opera, this work proved to be a captivating showcase for the Ashtead Choral Society. Their performance at St Martin of Tours church in Epsom was nothing short of remarkable, filling the space with a resounding richness and skilfully capturing the dramatic essence of the piece. The choir’s meticulous attention to the wide dynamic range inherent in the work promised the audience an evening of exceptional musicality and jollity.

Commencing with the Kyrie, the choir adeptly conveyed the dramatic nuances of the composition. The originally intended accompaniment of two pianos (Steve Ridge and Simon Phillips) gave the piece depth, with the cheeky addition of the harmonium (Lucy Morrell) lending a bold, brash Parisian flair to the performance. The Christe, nestled between the Kyrie movements, showcased Rossini’s mastery of polyphonic writing, with the choir executing a sotto voce Renaissance sound beautifully under the nuanced direction of their conductor, Andrew Storey.

The Gloria surged forth with intent and gusto, accompanied by impeccable diction from both choir and soloists – Lucy Cox (soprano), Susan Legg (alto), Adam Tunnicliffe (tenor), and Philip Tebb (bass). The quartet’s balanced delivery set the stage for individual moments of brilliance with each soloist shining in their respective movements that followed. Ridge and Phillips provided impeccable accompaniment and all the soloists held the audience’s attention throughout, despite the frequent repetition of material. The Gloria’s culmination, Cum Sancto Spiritu, showcased the choir’s operatic prowess, delivering long phrases with excellent shape, dynamic precision, and a deft handling of challenging rhythmic passages, leaving the audience breathless and ready for a break whilst anticipating more to come.

The second half commenced with the Credo and a robust entry by the tenors, imitated by a vibrant soprano sound calling the audience to “believe”. This contrasted sharply with the smoothness and softness of subsequent phrases, allowing solo and quartet interjections to make a profound impact. The complex yet enchanting Crucifixus, beautifully sung by Cox, set the stage for the choir’s triumphant return, Et Resurrexit, and a captivating ‘Et vitam venturi’ fugue concluded the Credo in grand fashion; the choir working hard to keep the sound clear and consistent and hold the audience’s attention. Morrell’s expert rendition of the Preludio Religioso on the harmonium preceded the choir’s flawless navigation of the challenging tonal shifts in the unaccompanied Sanctus, where once again the dramatic shifts in dynamics held the attention.

The final movement, Agnus Dei, unfolded in true Rossini fashion, blending the operatic melodic line and dramatic flourishes from Legg with seamless interjections of religious chorales by the choir. By the end, one could not help but believe that one was not in an opera house in Italy with the curtain about to fall. However, in a final twist the piece ended with quiet, delicately placed chords on the piano combined with the bite of the harmonium, thus leaving the listener guessing as to the religious nature of the piece. Maybe then a final word from the maestro himself as he mused in his original manuscripts, “Dear Lord, here it is finished, this poor little mass. Have I just written sacred music, or rather, sacrilegious music? I was born for opera buffa, as you well know. Not much technique, a little bit of heart, that’s all. Blessings to you and grant me Paradise.”

Ashtead Choral Society’s performance was a real cracker and fittingly full of vocal fireworks on bonfire night, leaving the audience with many tunes to hear over and over again as they went into the night.

David Preston

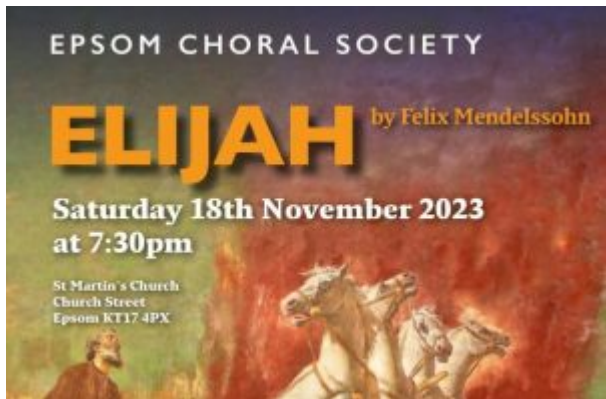
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Ashtead Choral Society celebrated Surrey’s Vaughan Williams.

“Oh Fate” fills lofty Epsom Church

Lavish production of Elijah reviewed

22 May 2024



Nigel Williams reviews **Epsom Choral Society**’s performance on Saturday 18th November of Felix Mendelssohn’s oratorio *Elijah* staged in the town’s **St Martin’s Church**.

The Old Testament prophet’s story was lavishly told with five soloists, an orchestra of strings, brass, woodwind, timpani and organ, and a chorus of several dozen well-drilled and responsive singers under conductor **Julian Collings**.

Your reviewer had attended their open rehearsal early in the term, when **Marion Lea** was supplying single-handedly (well, two-handedly) all the orchestra’s notes on the piano and the chorus were learning how their parts fitted together. In the time since, Epsom Choral Society turned early sketches into a complete painting. An “iron” sky could be coloured by high woodwind chords, limping string phrases could suggest Elijah’s weary departure for the wilderness, and ringing timpani and organ chords underpinned a song of pious thanksgiving for the end of a famine. Felix Mendelssohn knew how to deploy an orchestra and the best way to appreciate it was to hear it live.

The Choral Society’s task was to project their sound from the tiered staging behind the orchestra and unfold a series of choruses with very different challenges. In chordal passages they needed to keep in tune with each other, whereas in complex contrapuntal turn-taking movements the challenge was also keep up with the tempo and find their entries in among all the other notes. *Elijah* is also a big sing. It needs a lot of volume to deliver its full dramatic grandeur. They deliberately avoided over-singing the afternoon rehearsal, so there was still something in the tank even by the final two choruses, delivering whirring scale passages as *Elijah* went by a whirlwind to heaven. Those words ended very loud but began with some dramatic rapid whispering. Mendelssohn’s style relishes the idea of light “shining forth”. In one of those contrapuntal passages, the tenors, though fewer in number, still had that luminous quality more than two hours into the concert.

Before then, we had heard ample demonstrations of prowess from elsewhere in the choir. Not quite as outnumbered as the tenors, basses had a difficult task to make their entries clear when competing with organ, timpani and low strings but they were up to it.

Elijah is very much an English piece, written in the tradition of German composers working this side of the Channel. Mendelssohn was keen to make his lines fit the words of his English translator, William Bartholomew, and Choral Society made sure we heard them. You don’t often hear the word “laveth” in song but we heard it on Saturday. The most German-sounding moment came when the Angels’ trio “Lift thine eyes to the mountains” was sung by the choir sopranos and altos, instantly painting a scene of alpine villagers, with a lightness of touch that belied words about a foot that shall not be moved. There were not so many opportunities to show off delicacy and beauty of singing tone. They took that one, and the serene full-choir chorus that followed, “He, watching over Israel, slumbers not nor sleeps.” I missed “He that shall endure to the end”, cut for reasons of timing, which I think would have showed them off well.

Having an orchestra, the English Sinfonietta, and five soloists was a luxury. Treble Brandon McGuinness, taught singing at Epsom College by Christopher Goldsack, sang a resolute succession of top Gs while the orchestration changed underneath him. It is worth hearing those notes while they last. I have heard John Findon (tenor), Elizabeth Findon (soprano) and Judy Brown (mezzo) before and fully understand why they regularly get invited back. Judy Brown got the show-stopping movement, “O Rest in the Lord”. She kept it simple, with a voice both unaffected and affecting, offering half reassurance, half lullaby. They also gave us some delectable ensemble singing in the soprano-mezzo duet “Zion spreadeth her hands” and quartet “Cast thy burden upon the Lord”.

By far the largest role went to bass James Geidt as the prophet himself. Accustomed to operatic performance, he learnt much of his part by heart, so when singing he could look to the audience or the other performers. He brought a voice that was rich and treacly and looked the part with a luxuriant Old-Testament beard. His acting skills led his character from pompous confidence through fear and weariness to final moments of joy.

There was plenty of joy. Epsom Choral Society had learnt their parts well. They sang of rescue, perseverance and redemption, themes that were joyful enough, but they could also take pleasure in performing to high standard.

Nigel Williams belonged to St Martin’s Church choir for almost twenty-five years alongside several Choral Society members, singing second bass and composing a handful of pieces for them to sing. His edition of *Am Himmelsfahrtstage* with English translation is available from the Choral Public Domain library.