

Epsom Choral Society goes to Town on English music

16 July 2024



Epsom Choral Society joined the musical forces of The Barnes Choir, The English Sinfonietta and the Arcubus Ensemble on Saturday 13th July in The Cadogan Hall, London for a stirring celebration of English music, including William Walton's stupendous Belshazzar's Feast. **Peter Lutton** reviews the concert.

England in the 18th and 19th centuries is often said to have been a 'land without music'; this concert proved emphatically that from early in the 20th century every effort was being made to disprove that notion. From Parry in 1902 to Walton in 1931 we heard music of great confidence, assuredness of technique and not least, great beauty. The large forces needed were cleverly squeezed into the venue, including the optional extra brass. Such a splendid all-English offering encourages those of us who feel that much concert programming pays too little heed to the sheer quantity of excellent composition in these isles over the last one hundred and twenty years.

Parry's 'I was Glad' and 'Blest Pair of Sirens' are staples of the repertoire but were given more than the usual respect; indeed, there was some very careful treatment of the various parts of the text. Even if the brass opening in the former left little room for the choirs' entry to crescendo, mostly the dynamics were carefully observed, the Vivats were sensibly omitted (against current trends) and the contrasting middle sections in both were sensitively presented. The tempo of 'I was Glad' could perhaps have been a notch or two faster, given that this building has no noticeable reverberation period. In the louder parts, choral forces this size were able to balance the sheer power that modern orchestral instruments can produce and yet the climaxes were not overwhelming in a venue which might have been thought not quite large enough for such massed forces.

The baritone soloist, Philip Tebb, was a very good communicator in both Vaughan Williams' 'Five Mystical Songs' and Walton's 'Belshazzar's Feast', only very occasionally losing out to the scale of the orchestral sound behind him. A few hints of intonation fractionally under the note did not detract from his impassioned performance. When the choir was assigned to very gentle but tutti accompaniment, they were well balanced and the effect was surely exactly what the composer intended. Also particularly effective was the orchestral wind playing in 'The Call'. Finally, the tightness and drive of 'Let all the World' with its excellent dynamic contrast ensured an inspiring finish to these heartfelt settings of George Herbert's powerful poetry.

The English Sinfonietta's strings provided a very appropriate breather in Elgar's 'Serenade', before Parry's 'Blest Pair of Sirens' rounded off the first half. This was precise, immaculate ensemble playing of a very high order. The music was allowed to breathe and a great many nuances of rhythm and dynamic were brought out in all three movements. Particularly notable was the restraint in the final part of the second movement. The stylish yet slightly skittish playing evident in the third movement reflects Elgar's confident orchestration; string players eulogise Elgar's writing for their instruments, saying that his understanding of their needs is shown in the way the individual lines often lie under their fingers.

The climax of the evening was of course Walton's ground-breaking cantata, 'Belshazzar's Feast'. This must have been a revelation to all its hearers back in 1931 - it has this power now, as we heard clearly in this performance. The orchestra made the most of the dramatic brass and varied percussion writing, carefully designed so as not to drown out the choral writing, itself written deliberately in homophonic style so that the text would be clear to the listener. The rhythmic demands in this music are considerable, yet this performance came across as confident and accurate, even if some furious counting must have been going on amongst the differing voice parts.

The emotional outpouring in the first few pages reached a peak of luminosity in the repeated setting of the words 'How shall I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' Walton's bold choral writing broke new ground and the choirs did it full justice. The long and demanding unaccompanied baritone solo was delivered with both accuracy and passion before we launched into the vivid description of the feast and its musical elements.

Walton's music strikes a balance between modernity and tonal tradition which makes him more approachable than many other composers; this performance was admirable for its clarity and direction. The sinister percussion introduction to the writing on the wall and the choral shout of 'Slain!' were as effective as any visual image, showing the power of modern oratorio when brilliantly crafted and expertly handled.

The final romp of celebration was given due impetus and we were left breathless at the end by the grandeur of the conception and the quality of the performance.

Congratulations are due once more to Epsom Choral Society, The Barnes Choir, the Arcubus Ensemble and the English Sinfonietta, all under Julian Collings, for their stirring performance of a great classic.

Peter Lutton

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