

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:15
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Congratulations
from Romsey

From: John Tilling [mailto:TILLING@uk.ibm.com]
Sent: 16 May 2011 09:44
To: James Garrow
Cc: kathyedwardshome@aol.com; Joan alto 1 Robinson
Subject: Congratulations

Dear James,

I am sure Joan Robinson, our chairman, will be writing officially on behalf of RCS. However I wanted to say a big thank you from Kath and me for including us in your thoughts when you sent me that email two years ago! What a fantastic night and a fantastic achievement. Many many congratulations to you and your team for pulling off a triumph.

The size of that audience was amazing, as big as any Proms night. It just shows what can be done with the right work, the right support, a lot of hard graft and a can do attitude. Yes a non London choir can organise a concert and fill the Royal Albert Hall !!

When the dust settles, I'd be interested in hearing how you did it, if you are happy to share your experiences and the details, especially the all important one, cost. It would be nice to think one day we could return the favour, have David Truslove on the podium and invite you along! But thats just my pipe dream ! (I have a long standing ambition to do Berlioz Requiem !!)

Once again, many many congratulations,

Best wishes,
John and Kath Tilling

Romsey Choral Society

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Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:15
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Last night
 from London Chorus.
 J

From: Hannah Williams [mailto:hannah.williams@kingsturge.com]
Sent: 16 May 2011 11:19
To: chairman@vivacechorus.org
Cc: prue@londonchorus.org.uk
Subject: Last night

Dear James,

You may already have heard from Prue but she is now on holiday for a week so I wanted to write and thank you, for both of us, for the excellent organisation of last night's event, and everything leading up to it. You made our job very easy ('flu bug aside, of course!) and we hope that you all enjoyed the concert as much as we did. What a fantastic audience, too!

Kind regards,

Hannah
Choir Administrator
The London Chorus

Hannah Williams
Senior Business Development and Research Analyst
 King Sturge LLP
 30 Warwick Street
 London W1B 5NH

Tel +44 (0)20 7087 5770
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Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:15
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Mahler

From: Joan Hester [mailto:hester.joan@btinternet.com]
Sent: 16 May 2011 12:44
To: James Garrow
Cc: Treasurer
Subject: Mahler

Dear James, Bob and all the organising committee of Vivace Chorus,
I would like to congratulate you all on your triumphant and awesome organisation of the concert last night; it was a truly memorable occasion. I know you took great financial risks and you must have doubted your sanity at times, but I can only thank you for being so bold and for making it all possible for us all to enjoy. It was wonderful to be there under the direction of the unfaltering and amazing Jeremy, with such inspirational music.

I hope you are finding time to relax today.
Thank you all so much, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to take part, it was most uplifting, and Vivace will always be dear to my heart, now for many reasons!

Best wishes,
Joan

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:15
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Mahler concert

From: Geoffrey Johns [mailto:gocjohns@o2.co.uk]
Sent: 16 May 2011 13:59
To: chairman@vivacechorus.org
Subject: Mahler concert

Hi James - I could not let go of the Mahler performance without paying tribute to you and the whole team for the superb management of the whole process. It was a vast undertaking and so well executed down to the details - a fantastic job all round.

Rather than pester Jeremy direct please pass on my thanks and appreciation for this performance - not 100% on our part but very close, I feel. He really showed his skill in controlling such large forces with his usual calm firmness - really great to sing for!

What a sight also to see the Abert Hall full - looked like a popular prom night!

Regards Geoffrey Johns

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:02
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Mahler

From: Jeremy Backhouse [mailto:jeremybackhouse@btinternet.com]
Sent: 18 May 2011 10:05
To: 'James Garrow'
Subject: FW: Mahler

Dan – a great stalwart of Vasari, who sang in the performance

From: Daniel Burges [mailto:daniel.burgeshouston@btinternet.com]
Sent: 16 May 2011 14:18
To: Jeremy Backhouse
Subject: Mahler

Hi J

I'm sure you will be inundated with messages about how impressive the Mahler was last night, but just to add my own heartfelt input – I don't think I've ever seen you conduct in such an impressive, emotional and yet utterly controlled manner as last night. For me it was truly inspirational to just be there, let alone be part of the performance. I've also never cried so much during any piece of music as last night – the first time the harmonium comes in just completely took me apart!

Anyway, you should be justifiably proud of what you achieved there yesterday, and kudos indeed to the team at Vivace for putting that event on. There were two cynical hags sitting behind me from what ever chorus they were from where quite vocally salivating at the prospect of a duff performance to a half-empty hall from a conductor they'd never heard of, but you certainly put them right and I heard them say afterward that it was an utterly amazing performance, ha!

I've heard quite a few recordings and performances of Mahler 8 where a lot of the soloist sections are just dispensed with or given not much attention – it's almost as if the Conductor is more interested in getting to the big loud bits, but you really did something special with the tempi and lyrical rubato in all of those sections and Claire Seaton and the Tenor (forgot his name) in particular were wonderful. The opening of Faust was really evocative too, impressively handled. And what can I say about the Chorus Mysticus – that was so quiet, whispered! Wonderful!

My mum thoroughly enjoyed it, in fact she said she'd never heard a better performance. I saw your mum before we went on and she was really nervous for you but I reckon you made her proud!

Anyway, I've said enough; it was fantastic. I expect you're physically and emotionally completely drained by it, put your feet up and enjoy!

Dan x

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:05
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Mahler

From: Mary Moon [mailto:mary@lionelmoon.co.uk]
Sent: 16 May 2011 15:31
To: James Garrow
Subject: Mahler

Hello James

Here is one of, I imagine, hundreds of bouquets (this is from new American neighbours/friends)!! What an amazing day - I have a permanent smile on my face.

Can't tell you how grateful we all are to you and to Jeremy and all the others involved to have had the courage and inspiration to go forward with this. Lionel and I feel so fortunate that I am in the choir at this stage - we have so much pleasure from the concerts and friendships made.

My favourite part was the ending when I could relax from singing and just enjoy watching Jeremy conduct that amazing finish, and to be so thrilled for him!

Hi Mary!

Andy and I LOVED the performance last night! Wow! It was so fantastic and we were so pleased to be a part of it all. Sitting in the audience looking up at everyone there - hundreds of talented musicians of all ages - in that gorgeous hall was quite something. Very dramatic. I'm assuming you were there somewhere! I scanned the groups on either side but there were a few other people who looked "just like you"! . Were you by any chance on the left up high?? The Mahler was amazing and just completely inspired me. I must find a recording of this and listen to it more often. Now I understand why my mom adores Mahler.

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:01
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

-----Original Message-----

From: Jeremy Backhouse [mailto:jeremybackhouse@btinternet.com]
Sent: 18 May 2011 10:09
To: 'James Garrow'
Subject: FW: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

-----Original Message-----

From: sally_varley@hotmail.com [mailto:sally_varley@hotmail.com]
Sent: 16 May 2011 20:11
To: jeremy@jeremybackhouse.com
Subject: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

Website contact form submitted: Monday, May 16, 2011, 8:10 pm

Category: Contact Jeremy

Message: Many congratulations on a superb concert last night. It must have taken many months of planning and preparation, and your huge efforts resulted in an unforgettable performance. How exciting to play to a packed Albert Hall, and the enthusiastic applause at the end was well deserved indeed. The audience evidently enjoyed it as much as we did! Ed and I felt privileged to have been a part of it all - thankyou for giving us this amazing experience with Vivace.
Sally.

From: Ed and Sally Varley (sally_varley@hotmail.com)

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Version: 10.0.1375 / Virus Database: 1500/3641 - Release Date: 05/16/11

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:01
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

-----Original Message-----

From: Jeremy Backhouse [mailto:jeremybackhouse@btinternet.com]
Sent: 18 May 2011 10:08
To: 'James Garrow'
Subject: FW: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

An Alto in TLC

-----Original Message-----

From: caroline.fewkes@care4free.net [mailto:caroline.fewkes@care4free.net]
Sent: 16 May 2011 11:14
To: jeremy@jeremybackhouse.com
Subject: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

Website contact form submitted: Monday, May 16, 2011, 11:13 am

Category: Contact Jeremy

Message: Hi Jeremy

Thanks for a wonderful concert - it was great to be involved. I expect you were exhausted - I sure was!

I thought you might like to know that my other half, David, has now been to two performances of Mahler 8 that I've been involved in. The previous one, about three years ago, was conducted by Daniele Gatti. David said he enjoyed yesterday evening's performance much more. It come over much more clearly, and had greater precision and control. As well as being very exciting, of course!

Be seeing you...

All the best

Caroline

From: Caroline Fewkes (caroline.fewkes@care4free.net)

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:00
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

-----Original Message-----

From: Jeremy Backhouse [mailto:jeremybackhouse@btinternet.com]
Sent: 18 May 2011 10:10
To: 'James Garrow'
Subject: FW: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

Last one - enough self-trumpet blowing!!

-----Original Message-----

From: cimbroughton@aol.com [mailto:cimbroughton@aol.com]
Sent: 17 May 2011 12:06
To: jeremy@jeremybackhouse.com
Subject: Website Contact Form: Contact Jeremy

Website contact form submitted: Tuesday, May 17, 2011, 12:05 pm

Category: Contact Jeremy

Message: Dear Jeremy, I just wanted to say that you were simply fantastic on Sun! It was a real privelege to be singing with you and participating in such a fantastic venue so appropriate for Mahler. I had 35 guests there and all enjoyed it so much and even if there were a few very minor criticisms by some of my more musical friends, everyone was in admiration of your ability to conduct such a fine performance. Dealing with a professional orchestra must be particularly tricky and I really 'felt' for you when you picked up the baton to start the afternoon's rehearsal! I hope you felt Vivace chorus did you justice in the evening after a few worrying moments in rehearsal. We are so lucky to have you as our choir master and conductor! Thank-you so very much for a truly memorable experience.

Best wishes, mary Broughton

From: mary broughton (cimbroughton@aol.com)

Mary Clayton

From: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Date: 11 July 2011 18:02
To: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Subject: FW: Sunday

From: Jeremy Backhouse [mailto:jeremybackhouse@btinternet.com]
Sent: 18 May 2011 10:06
To: 'James Garrow'
Subject: FW: Sunday

From: susanna spicer [mailto:susanna.spicer@mail.com]
Sent: 17 May 2011 12:36
To: jeremybackhouse@btinternet.com
Subject: Sunday

Dear Jeremy

A totally inadequate note to say THANK you SO, SO much for the most memorable experience on Sunday. I can't tell you how privileged I felt to be in front of that vast assembly of musicians and under the direction of such a calm, sympathetic and exceptionally skilful maestro. The performance was fantastic, really superb, and my brother, who has sung the work as a chorus member (bass) many times in various contexts including the RAH and who is not prone to false praise (alas) has just sent me an email saying:

I thought Sunday was magical. It was always going to be, but I thought the choruses were extremely fine, both in not seeming to be behind the beat - even the basses, but also in their ability to sing quietly.

Appreciation indeed, I can assure you!

But you really have to take the lion's share of any plaudits. How anyone can control that number of players, singers and occasionally wayward (sorry!) soloists in the way that you did, when so many of the teams are both unfamiliar to him and amateur to boot, is a source of total admiration to me - Simon Rattle, eat your heart out! I defy anyone to have brought it off like you did, and I do hope you were pleased with yourself. I order you to be!

I am also hugely grateful that yet again you have provided me with one of my most treasured tingle-factor high spots. The Verdi Req in Guildford was one such - it conjured up a musical magic that none of the other performances I have done of the work before or since has every quite matched, and the hairs literally stood up on the back of my neck at repeated intervals on Sunday too, not merely from the excitement of the occasion but from the music-making itself.

So thank you, thank you, and may you enjoy repeated waves of satisfaction at the memory of what you brought off on Sunday. It really was a night to remember.

ALL best wishes
Susanna

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Mary Clayton

From: "Mary Clayton" <mary.meclayton@gmail.com>
Date: 12 July 2011 12:10
To: "James Garrow" <chairman@vivacechorus.org>
Subject: Re: Post Mahler 8

From: Clive Marks [mailto:clivemarks@tesco.net]
Sent: 26 May 2011 15:38
To: James Garrow
Subject: Post Mahler 8

Dear James,

It was a great pleasure for me to do Mahler 8 under Jeremy's baton. He is wonderfully clear in what he expects of the choir and calmly able to rely on people's musicianship to get over the occasional wobbly moment in rehearsals.

It was also accidental but brilliant of you/Vivace to have got my current choir and my old choir to team up in order to form Choir 2. The chances of that happening are so remote as to be almost negligible but you managed to do it. This made the day especially significant for me and even more fun than if the LSC had been in Choir 1. It also meant that I was able to tell the RCS what OMG moments they were going to experience throughout the last few days of rehearsal.

Vivace's organisation of those last few days and Jeremy's clear, friendly and brilliant directions meant that every OMG moment that I promised them happened absolutely to script.

Never before have I known a choir/conductor be brave enough to perform it on just one Tutti rehearsal, let alone hold the Piano and Tutti rehearsals on the same day as the performance. The crescendo of OMG moments was breath-takingly spectacular.

I am sure that Joan has done her official thank you to you but I would like to add my personal thanks to you, Vivace and Jeremy for a thrilling Mahler 8.

I very much look forward to us all working together again.

With kind regards,
Clive Marks

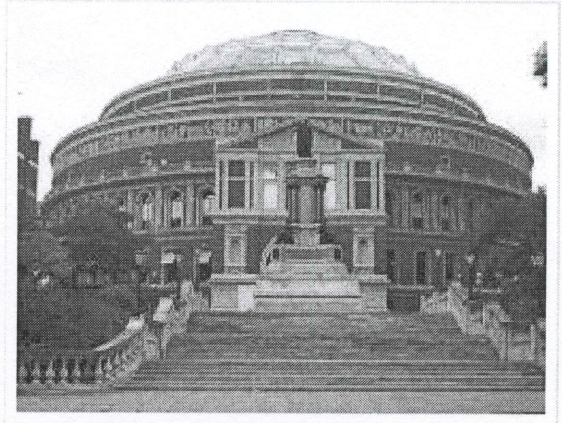
P.S. If Vivace ever need a spare Bass 1 to bolster forces, I would be delighted to be considered.

Mahler's 8th Symphony: The Royal Albert Hall, 15th May 2011

Monday, 16 May 2011 15:54 administrator



We are all constantly reassured that size isn't everything however, when it comes to Mahler's monumental 8th Symphony, you can pretty much forget the concept of beautiful things coming in small packages. This "Symphony of a thousand" (not Mahler's words, but ones puffed out by the arch publicist of its inaugural performance in Munich, Emil Gutmann) is an overwhelming and unequalled experience. At its best one cannot help but be swept along by the sheer audacity of its scale. Some of it is frankly rather barmy, with the first half being a setting of the hymn *Veni Creatus Spiritus*, whilst the second being a setting of the finale of Goethe's *Faust*. Latin morphs into German, spiritual hymn into temporal drama, with no discernable rhyme or reason, aside from the redemptive power of love.



Scholars bang on about the importance of the "eternal feminine" in this work, which unfortunately for me, conjures up images of an ageless Germaine Greer continually spouting tripe on Newsnight Review, which is frankly more than I, or anyone else, should have to bear. I am however, pretty certain that this is not what Mahler envisaged, but rather that our comprehension of God from the perspective of the "eternal feminine" helps to illuminate human nature - which is certainly one interpretation. Another is that Mahler was composing at the end of a period in which romantic notions of the "eternal feminine" abounded, especially amongst symbolist writers and artists. Gauguin in particular seized upon the idea that womanhood and spirituality is synonymous (whether from a positive or a negative perspective). Goethe, of whose works Mahler had a touch of monomania about, is said to have coined that term. Whether this is actually the case I do not know for certain, but what is certain is that *Faust* closes with the following lines:

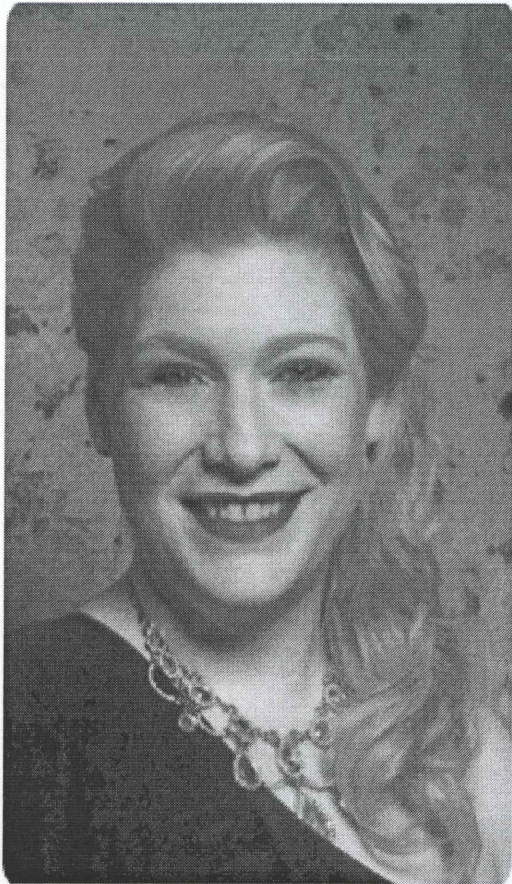
Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis;
Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.

*All that is perishable is but an allegory;
The Eternal Feminine draws us on.*

The whole work is an immense musical hybrid, part oratorio, part symphony. Mahler considered it to be his greatest work (or at least his "grandest symphony" as he later stated), the result of eight weeks of frenetic composition. Unusually it is composed of two parts, rather than separate, individual movements. Part one ought to last in excess of 20 minutes and part two in excess of 50 minutes, but performance practice is rather elastic to say the least. Solti's recording on Decca clocks in at 79.48, Rattles on EMI at 77.36 and Tennstedt's LPO performance at the RFH at 87.01. The very first performance, conducted by Mahler himself, was recorded as lasting 85 minutes (courtesy of composer Julius Korngold who noted down the duration), which gives some indication of how long a performance ought to last.



The forces on offer are suitably massive, with most performances clocking in with an orchestra in excess of 100 players (it can be done with a third less than this) and eight soloists, comprising three sopranos, two mezzos, a tenor, baritone and a bass, but the real strength comes in its usage of at least two standard choruses and a children's chorus, taking the combined forces in most performances anywhere from 250 to a staggering 1000. In amongst this monumental extravaganza, it has always tickled me to think that there are a couple of percussionists knocking seven bells out of the triangle, desperate to be heard in amongst the overwhelming din. All that appears to be missing from the instrumental forces, aside from the proverbial kitchen sink, is a pair of well-placed maracas.



The work itself is not often performed, presumably down to the logistics and costs of organizing it. I suspect that it also scares the life out of many would-be soloists, as the tessitura is very high indeed, especially for the sopranos. I have no idea how many high Cs the three sopranos must pop out between them, but an educated guess would be in excess of twenty, and from what I can tell, at some incredibly combative moments where the choruses and the orchestra are in full cry. It takes one hell of a pair of lungs to be even heard amongst all of this, let alone in such altitudinous reaches. Ideally therefore you need dramatic sopranos with ease on high and/or full-bodied lyrics whose top notes can penetrate easily through the orchestration. Naturally enough there aren't many singers who combine these virtues to a degree sufficient for singing in the Mahler 8, whatever register they are singing in. You need the lung-busting power of a Christine Brewer and a Stephanie Blythe to make the necessary impact. The men also have a very tough ordeal ahead of them. The tenor in particular is very exposed and needs a real hint of steel in the timbre.

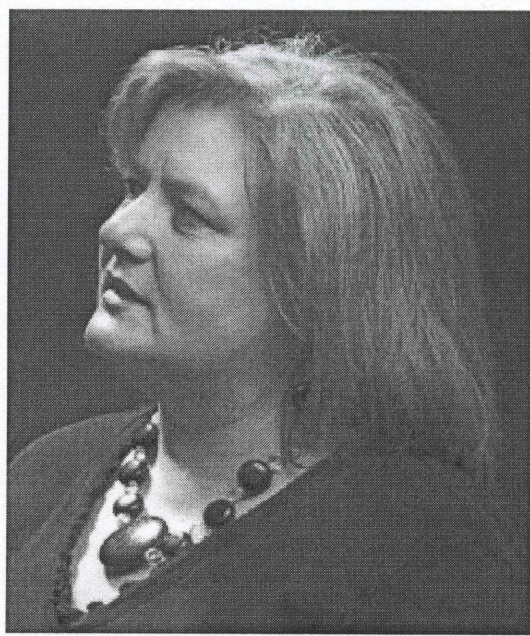
So what did we receive via this performance at the **Royal Albert Hall** - an ideal venue for a work of such scale? Well, the **Royal Philharmonic Orchestra** conducted by Jeremy Backhouse, were joined by 5 choirs, namely the **London Symphony Chorus**, **Vivace Chorus**, **The London Chorus**, **Romsey Choral Society** and the **Tiffin Boys' Choir**. The soprano soloists were **Claire Seaton** (*Magna Peccatrix*), **Elisabeth Meister** (*Una Poenitentium*) and **Helen Neeves** (*Mater Gloriosa*); the mezzos were **Susanna Spicer** (*Mulier Samaritana*) and **Deborah Miles-Johnson** (*Maria Aegyptiaca*); the tenor was **Adrian Thompson** (*Doctor Marianus*);

the baritone was **Colin Campbell** (*Pater Ecstaticus*); and the bass was **Michael Bundy** (*Pater Profundis*). The exact number of performers eludes me, although the programme does indicate that entire combined contingent would be in excess of 600 performers (I would have thought it nearer to 500).

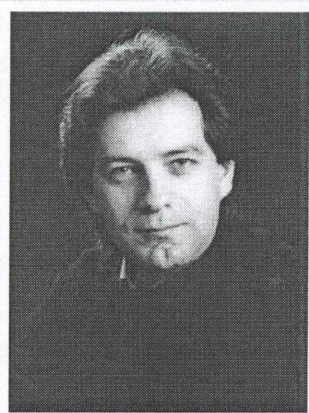
The overall effect was certainly a positive one, with the performance lasting circa 85 minutes. The three sopranos certainly shared the vocal honours of the evening. **Elisabeth Meister's** luxurious and powerful dramatic soprano arched some impressive phrases throughout the cavernous auditorium and clearly relished the challenges of those terrifying top Cs. This is a voice absolutely made for Strauss, as the heft of the voice is never compromised by the timbre. Too often such sopranos sacrifice beauty of voice just to shriek out a high note or two; in Meister's case vocal beauty and refulgence of tone go hand in hand. Her final performance as a member of the prestigious **Jette Parker Young Artists Programme** at The Royal Opera should be a must-attend for every vocal connoisseur. Apparently we can expect some fireworks from La Meister in a scene from Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Claire Seaton sang sweetly and effortlessly as *Magna Peccatrix*, floating some gorgeous head notes that wafted through the Albert Hall with ease and delicate poise. This is a singer I would certainly like to hear more of, as the lyrical beauty of the voice was bewitching and sensitive. **Helen Neeves** completed the trio of fine sopranos with an off-stage *Mater Gloriosa*, which soared confidently and attractively in the second half of the performance. If everyone else was of this caliber then it could have been a tremendous evening, but sadly this wasn't the case. The mezzos **Susanna Spicer** and **Deborah Miles Johnson** failed to make the necessary impact, with the latter in particular lacking the necessary oomph (that is, I believe, the accurate technical term) in her delivery. They were however, competent singers, if not ideal.

The men of course have their fair share of vocal terrors to negotiate, but irrespective of this, surely singers of a suitable standard could have been employed? A clapped out tenor and a strangled baritone, were joined by an under-powered bass. The tenor, **Adrian Thompson**, was diabolical. Wobbling his way through "H?chste Herrscherin der Welt" he shrieked out cracked high notes like they were going out of fashion. The baritone **Colin Campbell**, started out reasonably self assured, but his upper register began to take quite a hammering, with some unpleasant

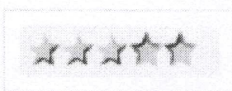


strangled effects at the top of his range ending up on display. **Michael Bundy** had a decent enough bass, but he was inaudible at the bottom and squeezed at the top. I'm sure that the baritone and the bass could sound much better than this, but if you don't have the chops for such a work, then why on Earth sing it? There must be plenty of Mozart and Handel available in which they could give respectable performances. As for Adrian Thompson, is there an equivalent of the knacker's yard for singers?



The combined choruses were suitably exultant, alternating between hushed tones and thrilling climaxes. They should be immensely proud of their performance, especially the **Tiffin Boys' Choir**, whose piping trebles were heard cleanly and clearly. The RPO had a good night, if not a perfect one. Timings appeared to be a bit of a minor issue, but on the whole it was good performance. **Jeremy Backhouse** conducted the gigantic forces and kept the whole thing ticking along with reasonable flair, but there was certainly a lack of electricity in the performance. Take the rocketing chain of top Cs which the sopranos sing in the *Gloria* - this should soar and sweep along with frenetic energy (listen to the Solti recording to hear how it's done), whereas here the pace felt just a bit too pedestrian. Still, the orchestra, choruses and the soloists were in safe, reliable hands, which given the scale of this piece is quite an achievement.

Mahler's 8th Symphony has almost certainly had greater outings than this performance, however some of the talent on display at the Royal Albert Hall last night more than lived up to Mahler's Herculean demands, giving us a taste of what this work could, when cast entirely from strength, achieve.



Antony Lias
Opera Britannia

Photographs: (1) The RAH - exterior; (2) RAH - interior, courtesy of John Milner; (3) Elisabeth Meister; (4) Claire Seaton; (5) Jeremy Backhouse

Tags: [Mahler 8th Symphony](#) [Royal Albert Hall](#) [Royal Philharmonic Orchestra](#) [Elisabeth Meister](#) [Claire Seaton](#) [Jeremy Backhouse](#) [London Symphony Chorus](#) [Vivace Chorus](#) [The London Chorus](#) [Romsey Choral Society](#) [Tiffin Boys' Choir](#) [Helen Neeves](#) [Susanna Spicer](#) [Deborah Miles-Johnson](#) [Adrian Thompson](#) [Colin Campbell](#) [Michael Bundy](#) [Antony Lias](#)

Last Updated (Tuesday, 17 May 2011 11:08)

London Eighth Symphony commemorates the centenary of Mahler's death

Mahler's Eighth – 'Symphony of a Thousand': Vivace Chorus, London Symphony Chorus, The London Chorus, Romsey Choral Society, Tiffin Boys' Choir, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Jeremy Backhouse (conductor). Royal Albert Hall, London 15.5.2011 (JPr)

Claire Seaton (soprano 1), Elisabeth Meister (soprano 2), Helen Neeves (Mater Gloriosa), Susanna Spicer (mezzo 1), Deborah Miles-Johnson (mezzo 2), Adrian Thompson (tenor), Colin Campbell (baritone) and Michael Bundy (bass).

In another review a little while ago I wrote how this gigantic undertaking – 'a gift to the whole nation' as Mahler called it – was dubbed 'Symphony of a Thousand' by the composer's agent in 1910 and although Mahler did not approve of this, that title has stuck to it ever since. How it was composed in two parts; the shorter first part, to the text of the ninth-century Christian hymn (attributed to Hrabanus Maurus, Archbishop of Mainz) 'Veni, creator spiritus', that paves the way for Part II, the final scene from Goethe's *Faust*.

I further explained to devotees of Goethe, mythology and Christianity, that this marriage of text and music undoubtedly holds many levels of meaning. Also, that this juxtaposition of sacred and secular texts in this symphony remains its least discussed aspect despite its obvious significance. It must be remembered that Mahler was rather ambivalent about religion though this symphony is an abiding testament to his deep and abiding spirituality; here we have both God and Goethe, eternal *life* versus eternal *love*. Mahler's wife, Alma – not the most reliable biographer, of course – reported that the music of the opening 'Veni, creator spiritus' ('Come, creator spirit') came to him in a burst of inspiration and this actually 'inspires' the thought that for the composer himself it might have resonated more as 'come, *creative* spirit'. In fact this symphony was composed in little more than eight weeks in 1906 although Mahler would wait until 1910 before conducting its first two performances in Munich; this was last première of one of his own compositions with which he would be involved.

I have always believed the greater catalyst for the symphony's composition seems to have been the 'ideal' Goethe expressed, as Mahler explained to his wife, Alma, in June 1906: 'That which draws us by its mystic force, what every created thing, perhaps even the very stones, feels with absolute certainty as the centre of its being, what Goethe here – again employing an image – calls the Eternal Feminine – that is to say, the resting-place, the goal, in opposition to the striving and struggling towards the goal (the Eternal Masculine) – you are quite right in calling the force of love. Goethe ... expresses it with a growing clearness and certainty right on to the Mater Gloriosa – the personification of the Eternal Feminine!'

I was delighted to hear much the same views on this Eighth Symphony expounded by Dr Jeremy Barham in his extremely lucid pre-concert talk to a huge audience that filled the arena at the Royal Albert Hall. Fascinatingly he was able to illustrate how, though the symphony seems to be made up of two disparate parts, in fact Part 2 starts to revisit ideas first encountered in Part 1. Especially through the incandescent melody heard first in Part 1 with the text 'Accende lumen sensibus' ('Kindle our senses with light').

In Part II Faust's soul is borne aloft by angels from a rocky ravine to heaven accompanied by a

number of devotional figures. The chorus intones its famous last words 'The Eternal-Feminine draws us upward' and this is at odds with the orthodox Christian vision of God the Father who is glorified at the end of Part 1. So what have we here then? Does Mahler want us to believe that the Christian redemption promised by Part 1 required the redeeming power of love as can only be mediated through the 'Eternal-Feminine'? For me another spectre other than Goethe – Richard Wagner – haunts this work because this is a typically Wagnerian idea. Indeed the long E-flat minor operatic prelude that opens Part II is deeply meditative and moving and clearly derived from *Parsifal*. And later when Doctor Marianus rhapsodises about Mater Gloriosa (Virgin Mary), calling her 'The Queen of Heaven (and) Highest Mistress of the World!', this is straight out of *Tannhäuser*. I believe that for Mahler it was Alma who was his 'Eternal-Feminine' and that is why the Eighth Symphony is dedicated to her.

This was a very worthy undertaking by Vivace Chorus and the only major Mahler concert in London marking the centenary of the composer's death on 18 May 1911. The stage platform and choir seats of the Royal Albert Hall were crammed full of the musicians of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, four choruses and a boys' choir. So probably nowhere near a thousand but still an impressive turnout all the same.

Sadly the line up of soloists was not the strongest and most did not have voices big enough for the Royal Albert Hall or the technique to overcome some of Mahler's vocal demands at certain times. I assume Adrian Thompson has not been well as he looks a shadow of his former self and he no longer has the refulgent tenor that made him a wonderful Doctor Marianus when I heard him at the Three Choirs Festival in 2007. One singer with some excuse was Claire Seaton (Soprano 1 and Magna Peccatrix) who sang from a seated position due to an obvious injury and this could not help her projection. Helen Neeves of course had no problem with her short contribution as Mater Gloriosa and the best singer by far was Elisabeth Meister as a radiant Penitent.

Under the direction of their very animated conductor, Jeremy Backhouse, all concerned gave us a spirited account of the music and the overall sound was often quite breathtaking. Part I seemed suitably stirring and Part II adequately romantic and transcendental. The massed choirs sang their hearts out though few words were discernable from where I was sitting. Sadly the lights never went up a notch in the auditorium to enable any of us in the audience to follow the words in the Vivace Chorus's excellent printed programme. The best performances of the Eighth Symphony highlight the symphony's significant moments and recurring ideas, fusing all these different things together without losing sight of where the work is taking us. It is unlikely Jeremy Backhouse had enough rehearsals with the orchestra – let alone the various choruses – to do complete justice to such a grand and complex work so he is to be congratulated on holding everything together as well as he did. However, a sense of ennui did seem to hover over the opening passages of Part II that suggested conductor and orchestra were just feeling their way through the music at times.

Jim Pritchard

HUGE - SYMPHONY OF A THOUSAND!

Shackleford's Towards Fellowship' Mahler trip to The Royal Albert Hall on Sunday 15th May, with the detailed organisation in the capable hands of Dorothy Chadburn, really was memorable.

Gustav Mahler's Symphony No 8 was composed in 1906 but it was not until 1910 that he finally agreed to the premiere of the work which took place in Munich with Mahler himself conducting. The audience then included Siegfried Wagner, Clemenceau and Henry Ford.

This May's performance was conducted by Jeremy Backhouse, with eight solo singers, The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and five choirs - London Symphony Chorus, London Chorus, Romsey Choral Society, Tiffin's Boys' Choir and, of particular local interest, Vivace Chorus with a soprano and a tenor from the village.

At the first performance there was a total of 1029 performers - hence the sobriquet 'Symphony of a Thousand'. Similar numbers took part in this performance - it was just huge!

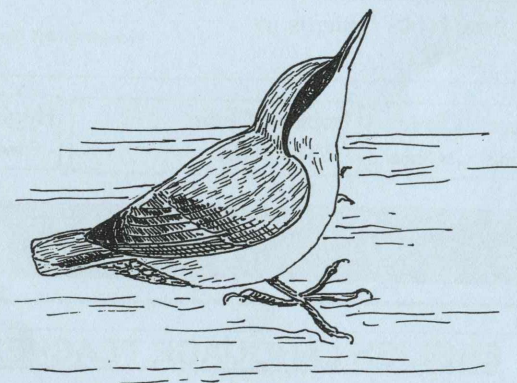
Our seats were excellent; close enough to the orchestra to be able to watch each musician, with the closest to us being the harpists, the timpanists, and the percussionists - in the case of the latter with long rests and then loud crashes where timing was critical.

The symphony has just two movements: the first an imposing setting of the Latin *Veni, Creator Spiritus* hymn; the second a dramatic, slightly shortened version of the final scene from Goethe's *Faust*. This was all explained in the programme and in the introductory talk prior to the performance - most helpful when listening to such a massive work.

Altogether, a wonderful experience for both the musically knowledgeable and for those who might never have attended such a performance if it were not for Towards Fellowship. Our thanks to TF and in particular to Dorothy Chadburn for making the whole evening possible for the Shackleford contingent!

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