

"Touches of sweet harmony"

A Review of the Concert by Vivace Chorus at Guildford's GLive on Saturday 9th March 2013

I am of the generation brought up on the original version of Vaughan Williams' 'Serenade to Music' for 16 solo voices, (and they were the finest voices of the day), so to hear the later choral arrangement was something I was looking forward to, if with a little trepidation. However, I need not have worried. The Vivace Chorus brought to the opening a gentle sweetness of sound which was quite captivating, and as the harmonies faded the sopranos gave us the most limpid top A in the phrase "of sweet harmony". Diana would not have been woken by the soprano "Come ho!" which had good attack but needed more volume. The weight of the orchestra covered the words in many places and this was a problem later in the programme too. Perhaps the choir staging could be raised by a few feet to enable the voices to project out into the auditorium at a higher level than the orchestra. However the choral colour and beautiful legato cannot be faulted.

This performance of Elgar's Cello Concerto, soloist Julian Lloyd Webber, was full of interest. I had never thought of the first movement being a conversation between the orchestra and the cello, but the orchestra were so sensitive to Lloyd Webber's solo passages moving as one, sometimes quite playfully, that it felt more intimate than I have heard before; almost a chamber performance. There were many exquisite pianissimi from the cello, so soft as to draw the listener in, and then in contrast some wonderfully burnished brass forte sections. In the slow movement the cello moulded the phrases with a haunting beauty, but this is music which sears the soul and makes the heart cry out with the pain of it and for me that did not happen tonight. The final note of the adagio was, however, quite breathtakingly stunning.

The second half began with the unaccompanied part song 'There is sweet music'. Here were some beautifully shaped phrases and no orchestra to mask the words, so the poetry was able to sing as sweetly to us as the voices....but sadly no 'p' on the end of the final 'sleep'!

The programme concluded with a third Elgar work, 'The Music Makers'. This is a setting of a poem by the Irish-English poet A.W.E. O'Shaughnessy for chorus, orchestra and mezzo-soprano. Elgar has composed a wonderful tapestry of sound and colour and the Vivace Chorus wove the threads with utmost sensitivity.

At last we heard the choir in full flow, with some thrilling forte passages, which certainly made sense of the text – "and therefore today is thrilling".

Natalia Brzezinska was unfortunately indisposed and her place was taken at the last moment by Jeanette Ager. Hers was a voice with a richness in the lower register as well as strong and vibrant colour on her top notes.

Elgar's orchestration in parts is full and strong, as is the choral writing. There is no possibility of the solo voice being heard in many passages where orchestra, choir and soloist are all asked to perform very loudly at the same time, and this was unfortunately the case. Surely the orchestral dynamic needs to be tempered so that the solo phrases can soar above them.

This final piece showed Jeremy Backhouse in full control of all the musical forces before him, and he gave us a dynamic performance. The final phrase 'We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams' was perhaps the highlight of the evening, spinning out endlessly into a breathless hush. It was hard to break it with the deserved applause.....

and we left the concert hall – (forgive a further quote from the final item) – '*our souls with high music ringing.*'