

Elgar The Kingdom Three Spires Singers and Truro Choral Society, Truro Cathedral

Review by Judith Whitehouse

REGULAR Truro Cathedral concertgoers will have noticed immediately what was different about this concert – with a choir numbering up to 250 the usual layout had to be reversed to fit everyone in. The audience stretched back almost to the altar and your reviewer was in the Dean's stall.

The Kingdom was part of Elgar's project that he called his "Gigantic Worx" – setting most of the New Testament to music. His chronic inability to meet deadlines made The Kingdom his last work on the subject and, for me, the concentration on narrative rather than drama makes it less immediately rewarding than The Dream of Gerontius.

I was, however, won over by Christopher Gray's majestic direction of the Prelude, full of orchestral opulence and passion, and the well-balanced interplay between the chorus and soloists in the opening scene.

The soprano, Tessa Spong, and mezzo-soprano, Louise Mott, contrasted well in their second-scene duet; Mott's extended recitatives had a glowing clarity and Spong's highlight, The Sun Goeth Down, had an almost operatic feel.

The tenor David Butt Philip (as John) combined lyricism with intensity in the "healing" scene and in his duet with the bass, David Stout (Peter), whose own extended solo was truly dramatic and commanding – a very fine team of soloists.

The combined chorus, in their varying roles as disciples, holy women, sceptics and repentant souls were just superb – a tribute to their respective choir trainers. Truro Choral Society's Martin Palmer was close at hand, playing a cello alongside author Patrick Gale. One particularly striking moment was the six-part unaccompanied female "mystic chorus" – over 100 voices in perfect tune. The orchestra sounded truly Elgarian from nobility to delicate wind, from glittering harp glissandi to menacing march. And the size of the choir ensured that nobody was swamped – at full volume they were most impressive.

Martin Hall, who had conducted the most recent Truro Kingdom – 30 years ago – recalled some balance problems back then with a much smaller chorus, but was greatly impressed by this performance.

Gray's habitual attention to detail and thorough preparation ensured that the performers made the most of Elgar's dynamic and textural nuances, not neglecting the more meditative moments.

The final pages, with a glorious climax followed by the gentlest of endings, were perfectly handled.

Let's hope the two choirs get the chance to sing together again – what a treat.

West Briton, April 3rd 2014

