# ****THREE SPIRES SINGERS' PERFORMANCEOF****THE KINGDOM ****REVIEWED BY CHRIS BEST****

From time to time the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra set aside their usual programme of mixed choral and instrumental music in order to tackle a single large-scale choral work. Much loved favourites such as Haydn’s ‘Creation’, Bach’s ‘B Minor Mass’, Mendelssohn’s ‘Elijah’ and Elgar’s ‘Dream of Gerontius’ have all taken centre stage in this way. But on Saturday 23rd November Truro Cathedral resounded to the strains of a less familiar giant of the repertoire, Elgar’s ‘The Kingdom’.
This extraordinary, convoluted and somewhat problematic work occupied its composer’s mind in some form or another for almost half a century, perhaps unsurprisingly given its initial ambitions to set virtually the entire New Testament. In the end, his ‘Gigantic Worx’ became scaled down to two completed oratorios, ‘The Apostles’ (op. 49) and ‘The Kingdom’ (op. 51), the latter being premiered at the Birmingham Festival in 1906.
The work falls into five sections, preceded by an extensive orchestral prelude. The prelude is classic Elgar, beautifully crafted and orchestrated and rich in the composer’s distinctive upward sweeping melodies. Conductor Christopher Gray coaxed the very best out of the orchestra in bringing us this stirring and powerful concert opener.
Choir and soloists combine forces to propel the music into the first choral section (‘The Upper Room’). At once it became clear that we were in the presence of four exceptionally talented soloists, all demonstrating complete command of their material, each distinctive in their vocal style and interpretation. Soprano Catherine Hamilton’s clear, bright sound differed strikingly from mezzo-soprano Sarah Pring’s warmer, more vibrato-laden tone. Baritone David Stout’s delivery, huge and powerful across its entire range, contrasted with tenor David Webb’s pitch-perfect if somewhat thinner voice. While at times this could make balance or unity in ensemble passages difficult to achieve, it did vividly bring to life the individual personalities of disciples Peter (baritone) and John (tenor), of Mary Magdalene (mezzo-soprano) and Mary, mother of Jesus (soprano).
Supporting these fine soloists, the choir never wavered from its concentration and passionate delivery. High notes soared in the ‘Pentecost’ as the sopranos invoked the spirit to “…Come from the four winds…” as contraltos poured “…forth of (their) Spirit…” and “…shew wonders in the heaven above, and signs on the earth beneath.”
As the music’s restlessness built steadily towards ‘In Solomon’s Porch”, the strings began to struggle somewhat with the flood of racing semiquavers, their reprieve coming with Peter’s (perhaps apposite) solo “…I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.” And almost as if by way of atonement for foisting such tortuous lines upon the violins, Elgar proceeds to treat them to some exquisite passages during ‘The Arrest’, leader Pauline Lowbury delivering a sweet, yet melancholy solo line. The section develops this new material, restless as ever, yet resolving unexpectedly - again with solo violin - as soprano sings “…a prayer unto the God of my life.”
The fifth and final part of The Kingdom (also called ‘The Upper Room’) subdivides into three: ‘In Fellowship’, ‘The Breaking of the Bread’ and ‘The Prayers’. Structurally, it is an ending that shows signs of Elgar’s battles in reconciling his original ambitions for a third oratorio to follow ‘The Kingdom’ with the realities of delivering a finished product to a tight deadline. Testament then to his genius as a composer that the music still radiates such intensity of feeling.
A day before the concert, the news broke of the tragic death of Stephen Cleobury, a key figure in contemporary British choral music. The evening’s performance was duly dedicated to his memory with an opening prayer and eulogy. Elgar’s oratorio, in setting The Lord’s Prayer and other devotional lines, thus took on a singular poignancy. Soloists, choir and orchestra delivered such focus and concentration here in bringing the work to its resolution that their performances could surely have met only with the dedicatee’s unreserved approval.
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