

## REMEMBRANCE

A cold November evening, the night before Remembrance Sunday, and the Three Spires Singers and Orchestra have assembled in Truro Cathedral under the baton of Christopher Gray for a concert to mark the centenary of the end of World War 1. Introductions followed from the Very Revd. Roger Bush, Dean of Truro Cathedral, who offered reflections upon the sacrifice of those who fought and died. While the music was certainly primed to underline this message, texts by Binyon and Whitman would also serve to remind us of the plight of those who suffered and *survived*, left to face the lifelong consequences of their trauma and loss. In this, the musical programming was sensitive and imaginative, carefully weighed to reflect both the attitudes towards war of the time and those informed by the wisdom and curse of hindsight.

The concert began with a little known orchestral version of John Ireland's hymn **Greater Love**. While the piano, positioned in readiness for the second item only feet from the front row and with lid raised, somewhat marred the experience for some audience members, this work still made for a perfect opener. It introduced us briefly to the evening's vocal soloists, Sally Harrison (Soprano) and Felix Kemp (Baritone), whose role was to highlight a mere two lines of the choir's text: a compositional decision that might today seem somewhat extravagant. The music stirred emotions through some wonderful orchestral colours and suspensions, showing choir and orchestra in fine form.

The second work, Gerald Finzi's **Eclogue**, featured Jonathan Carne, whose sensitive and expressive piano phrasing, with gentle support from the strings, conjured a more reflective atmosphere. While essentially Romantic in idiom, the cadenza touched upon harmonies that raised darker clouds as a hint of the music to follow.

But before those clouds could thicken, the choir and orchestra burst into the opening lines of Elgar's **The Spirit of England**, a movement entitled 'The Fourth of August', the text of which on first sight might seem to promote disturbingly jingoistic sentiments. In fact, it captures the tragically innocent enthusiasm that sent volunteers so willingly to the front, blissfully unaware of the hell that awaited them. The music similarly strides out with unshakable confidence. While the cathedral's acoustic was not always kind to the choir's diction and clarity of line here, the soloists cut clearly and powerfully through the textures. In the two movements that follow, 'To Women' and 'For The Fallen', Binyon's poetry reveals its true, deeply tragic, message. Elgar's late style, heard in works like the Cello Concerto and Falstaff, serves this sentiment perfectly, from the impassioned upward leaps of melody for the despairing wives left to fear for their loved ones to the falling bass lines for the trudge of tired marching feet. The orchestra, soloists and choir here worked as one to nerve shattering effect.

After a well-earned interval Elgar returned, with his exquisite **Sospiri** for strings, harp and organ. The breathtaking melody, weaving dissonances against the simple chords beneath, looks at once backward to the soundworld of Mahler (the Adagietto of the 5th Symphony is very much called to mind) and forward thirty years to the music of Benjamin Britten. The leader of the orchestra, Charles Mutter, put heart and soul into this gem of a piece.

The most substantial work of the concert was Vaughan Williams' **Dona Nobis Pacem**. The events of World War 1 are here seen from twenty years later, when the clouds are once again gathering over Europe. Contemporary with his work 'Job, a Mask for Dancing' and the 4th Symphony, much of the music draws upon the same stormy language. But there are hints too of what is to come in the more reflective 5th Symphony. The spirit of this work is unashamedly pacifist. The Walt Whitman verses pull no punches when it comes to depicting the horrors of war and the cry for peace. Vaughan Williams' music admirably rises to both challenges.

Throughout her solo passages, Sally Harrison showed expert judgement in choosing when to employ heavier vibrato and when (such as when uttering the work's title) to return to a purity and innocence of sound. Felix Kemp's vocal tone occasionally tended toward harshness when approaching the tenor register, but his sound was wonderfully warm during John Briggs's 'The Angel of Death' text and invoked melancholy and tenderness throughout the 'Reconciliation' movement. Vaughan Williams was a great master at writing for choir, amateur and professional alike. The extreme clarity of line and singability of his music can always hold its own against complex orchestral textures or, as in this case, the extended reverberation times of difficult auditoria.

The work ended on a more optimistic note, a call for unity and a final prayer for peace. We, the audience, were left reflecting upon how that message, written at a time when Europe stood once again on the brink of war, feels sadly and urgently relevant today. This profoundly moving concert was not one of flag-waving, pomp and circumstance, but of sombre reflection and circumspection. We left the cathedral quietly, our thoughts turning to the Armistice Day commemoration that lay ahead.

Chris Best

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