

CONCERT BY SOMERSET CHAMBER CHOIR, Wells Cathedral, Saturday 26th July

Somerset Chamber Choir celebrated its 30th birthday in very fine style with a particularly pleasurable concert in Wells Cathedral on Saturday 26th July. They appeared alongside the 57-strong Berliner Kantorei with whom the Somerset Chamber Choir formed a liaison following a chance meeting of singers around two years ago, and the Southern Sinfonia, a professional chamber orchestra based in Berkshire.

The all-English programme began with Parry's anthem "I was glad", originally composed for the coronation of King Edward VII. Conductor Graham Caldbeck picked a nobly measured tempo and the orchestra and the Chamber Choir, singing without the Kantorei in this item, responded with assurance and reserved their energies for the powerful 'Vivat' outbursts. Alongside the full orchestra and full organ, the 63 singers were challenged to balance the volume of instrumental sound, but in the warmly lyrical quieter passages, the overall blend was very attractive and engaging.

After a short interlude for the Berliners to take their places in a re-arranged formation of all singers, Parry's large-scale anthem "Blest pair of Sirens" followed, with words by Milton. The combined choirs tackled this essentially very-English music with understanding and skill, and the part-singing within the voices came across strongly, each section committed to the whole, while the orchestral interludes featured beautifully balanced timbre and colour.

Being a 30th-birthday event, and every member of the audience an "invitee", it was quite in order that everyone present should have been invited to take part in the third piece, "Jerusalem", sung in traditional fashion, the vaults of the cathedral amplifying the well-rounded tone in a most satisfying way.

After these three "amuses-bouche", the main course, Elgar's oratorio "The Dream of Gerontius" was served. With words by Cardinal Henry Newman, the extended work covers the progress of a dying dreaming Soul through Judgement to Purgatory, and was premiered in 1900, somewhat under-rehearsed and tepidly received.

A strong case was made in the programme notes that Elgar had been particularly influenced by, amongst others, Wagner – not least for the regular use of *Motifs* to depict Fear, Prayer, Sleep, etc – and Brahms. It is also timely to point out that the work's German première was received with acclaim. Thus, with a combined Anglo-German choir, it was a natural choice for Somerset Chamber Choir to put forward.

Following a beautifully-delivered orchestral Prelude, tenor Robert Murray as *Gerontius* revealed a natural affinity, perhaps also affection, for his protagonist, in warm-toned and projected singing, well able to rise above the orchestra's strong support in his most anguished moments, as well as sustaining compassion whilst a tender and vulnerable Soul. His stage presence was exemplary.

Baritone Jonathan Lemalu, singing the Priest, and the Angel of the Agony, commanded an outstanding presence, his contributions featuring fearless conviction and a total involvement in the powerful drama, with rich and variable tone.

Central to this, the Chorus played a variety of rôles – Friends, Demons, Angelicals – and it is to its very great credit that its exceptional contribution to the success of the entire performance was the result of little more than a day or so's combined rehearsal. Against a powerful orchestra placed between it and the audience, there were times when choral forces were almost overwhelmed: as Demons, the music is extremely complex and fragmented, with little more than a dozen or so singers per vocal line, while the whole orchestra frequently supplies dramatic loud outbursts, adding to the very considerable turmoil. At other times, however, we heard singing of rare quality, from the nuanced control and balance of the Angels, unaccompanied, to the strong entries for "O generous love", following Graham Caldbeck's speed-changes with great care.

Mezzo-soprano Victoria Simmonds was the third soloist, the Angel, whose part – as Gerontius' journeying companion - is sometimes undervalued but nevertheless intrinsic to the entire events. Her vocal range was impressive, but alongside two powerful characters she lacked a little of their projection and dramatic involvement; however, her prefacing of the Choir's ecstatic *fortissimo* "Praise" was inspired and memorable.

Throughout the performance the considerable number of orchestral players added plenty of background as well as foreground to the proceedings, its contribution of extremely difficult music carried through with real conviction. In particular, the strings could be singled out for playing with aplomb, technical skill and very considerable range of tone.

The compelling operatic feel of the piece points, perhaps, to its musically Teutonic origins, but as a work more in keeping with English Edwardiana, this was the resounding conclusion to a triumphantly successful evening's music-making by some of the county's finest musicians, both local and associated.

Vivat Somerset Chamber Choir!

Michael Cockerham.