

REVIEW

Harrogate Choral Society, Royal Hall, Harrogate

The first concert to be given by an amateur group in the newly-refurbished Royal Hall was marked by an outstanding performance of Mendelssohn's oratorio 'Elijah'. Also being celebrated was Harrogate Choral Society's 60th anniversary and the work chosen for this doubly important occasion was the same one as had been performed at the choir's first-ever concert in 1948 – just five days away from the same date.

From the sonorous sounds of the opening of the Overture, effectively produced by the wind sections of the Chameleon Arts Orchestra, through to the triumphant and glorious final chorus, this was a performance with considerable attention to detail and yet high on drama. In fact, so well-brought-out was this latter feature of the work, which is now less frequently-performed, that the audience could easily acknowledge how operatic Mendelssohn's writing is.

The string section, despite their lowish numbers, contributed vividly to the build-up of the Overture which led directly into the very powerful first choral entry. The instrumentalists were to accompany appropriately sympathetically throughout as well as contribute poignant cello and oboe solos. At all times the choir shaped their phrases, appropriately smoothly when required, with much thought to the text and their attention to the accentuation reflected this as well as in certain passages where this was an important feature. Special mention must go to the sopranos, for their purity and clarity of tone, and the tenors for some, at times, delicate singing, although an occasionally very slightly early entry from this latter section was noted. The alto and bass sections provided outstanding support at all times, being at their best in the fugal passages.

Of the five soloists (William Dutton, treble, Claire Rutter, soprano, Gaynor Keeble, mezzo-soprano, Joshua Ellicott, tenor, and Stephen Gadd, baritone) the main quartet blended better later than in the first half of the work – the fragmentary *Cast thy Burden* proving challenging. Gadd particularly impressed with his clarity of diction, especially in the more rapid recitatives, and Keeble sang with a clear sense of drama especially in the most moving *O Rest in the Lord*. Dutton performed with a beautiful clarity and yet was forceful when needed managing to soar over the combined forces of the large choir and orchestra.

Twelve singers from the young group *Verse and Chorus* sang the famous trio *Lift Thine Eyes* commendably from memory with well-balanced harmonies and excellent diction, having been well-prepared by their conductor David Darling. Despite their numbers they later blended perfectly with the adult choir. A quadruple quartet from the main choir also made for an effective contrast, both groups representing Angels.

Andrew Padmore, who directed the whole with his usual energetic precision, seems to continue to be able take the Society on to a new level. The improvements made to the quality of sound and vividness of contrasts are there for all to hear.

For this writer, his first visit to the restored venue made him feel as though he had never been away and that it felt little differently from his first experience of the building as a student 38 years ago. This, surely, means that the project has been an outstanding success. He was seated for the first half of the concert on the left hand end of the second row of the stalls very adjacent to the kettledrums, and for the second half on the front row of the upper circle. From that latter position the balance between voices (all) and orchestra was, most surprisingly and interestingly, not as good.

However, this was a magnificent occasion and, thanks to planners and musicians, we can now look forward confidently to many more like it.

Paul Dyson