

Moving performance of Elgar's masterpiece

John Dunford reviews

Harrogate Choral Society's The Dream of Gerontius in Ripon Cathedral

Harrogate Choral Society's need to perform in Ripon Cathedral demonstrates once more the difficulties faced by a number of organisations at the closure of the Royal Hall, one of Harrogate's architectural gems and an essential centre for the Arts. Yet in the marvellous setting of Ripon Cathedral, Elgar's masterpiece was raised to a dimension beyond mere performance, providing the opportunity for a deeply spiritual experience.

Elgar wrote of *The Dream of Gerontius* 'This is the best of me.....this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory'. Performing with Harrogate Choral Society were three outstanding soloists, Canzonetta, previous winners of *The Sainsbury's Choir of the Year* and *The Chameleon Arts Orchestra* and expectations were running high. We were not to be disappointed. On a tempestuous evening, with gale force winds strong enough to prevent access through the west door, a packed Cathedral took part in a memorable performance of quality and dignity.

The Orchestra introduced the themes of the work in the prelude, creating a feeling of calm and, at times, awe which set the atmosphere for the rest of the performance. The strings gave an impressive richness of tone, notable at the opening, though with such a large orchestra there was a lot for the single double-bass player to support. Their attention to detail produced some splendid dynamic shading aided by clear woodwind lines and carefully managed brass playing, perhaps a little understated at times, and excellent percussion.

Adrian Thompson was a convincing and dramatic Gerontius. The range of vocal colour, from tremendous power to subdued beauty, showed great control combined with excellent diction which gave us an indication of his understanding and conviction in the role. In the second part of the work the relationship between Gerontius and the Angel is crucial and this was captured beautifully. Margaret McDonald (mezzo-soprano) made a huge impact as soon as she stepped on to the podium. She looked stunning. Her presence and commitment, supported by an intensity of performance through supreme musicianship gave us a real sense of support for Gerontius. As the Priest and the Angel of the Agony, the sheer power of Jeremy White's commanding bass voice rang around the Cathedral. A finer trio of soloists it would be difficult to find.

Harrogate is a large choral society which produces a well balanced sound and is capable of great beauty. Of particular note was the quality and blend of the ladies voices and the diction of the whole choir which was consistently good. Under the excellent guidance of Jeffrey Wynn Davies the choir tackled the differing vocal techniques, ranging from the pure and ethereal tones of the opening Kyrie, to the full-blooded 'Praise to the Holiest in the height' and the taunting cackles of the Demons with great aplomb.

The Chorus of Angelicals was provided by the outstanding voices of Canzonetta. This was, for the most part, an inspired choice; the excellent and strong voices added hugely to the drama of the larger choruses. It may have been the desire to be heard above the noise of the wind outside rather than any musical consideration, but the balance and blend of the quieter choruses was less well managed. The sixteen singers produced such a well focussed sound, particularly the tenors, that the balance between the two choral groups became more marked, and the general dynamic level increased above that suitable for the more prayerful moments such as the opening Kyrie and 'be merciful' choruses.

It was a privilege to be present at this performance in the splendid setting of Ripon Cathedral. We are fortunate to be able to have such a high standard of performance from the choir and to be able to hear such fine soloists, orchestral players and semi-chorus. There was, from the beginning, a depth of feeling, confidence and commitment for this work from every performer and Jeffrey Wynn Davies is to be congratulated for his inspired direction that united all the forces under his baton so effectively.