

THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS: Eastbourne Choral Society
at All Saints Church, Saturday 29th March 2014

Review by ROBIN GREGORY

Few choral societies can undertake a production of “Gerontius”. Elgar’s masterpiece defeated Hans Richter, no less, at its first production in 1900. One can see why. The leading tenor role is as demanding as anything in opera. The orchestral writing is so brilliant that it renders many a choral passage inaudible. The subject-matter (a man in the agony of dying) is hardly likely to bring in a large audience. Yet the fact is that when it works it is one of the most overwhelming musical experiences in the choral repertoire, right up there with the best of Bach and Mozart.

John Hancorn, Musical Director of Eastbourne Choral Society, seems to welcome a challenge. To begin with he made a number of wise decisions. He enlisted support from East Sussex Bach Choir and Phoenix Choir, so there was an impressive body of singers. His orchestra, the Eastbourne Sinfonia, some forty players, is well led by Jenny King, and has the weight to do justice to the composer’s demanding score without over-filling the space of All Saints Church. And he no doubt used his extensive knowledge of singers to select three soloists with experience, thus relieving him of having to coach them as well as the choir (as sometimes happens!)

The long opening introduction showed instantly that we were in safe hands as regards the orchestra’s contribution. The tonal balance was perfect; the individual solo passages were exquisitely played. And so it was throughout the entire evening. So what of the choirs? Again, it was good to hear from end to end such involved yet controlled singing. Of course, as has been the case in every performance of Gerontius I have seen, many of the words were not heard; but the provision of a complete text in the excellent programme meant that one could, if one wished, follow the argument. Or one could simply wallow in the lovely sounds the large combined chorus was making.

The bass solos were handsomely sung by Matthew Hargreaves, especially fine in “Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul”. As the Angel, Pippa Dames-

Longworth's experience gave us confidence that the soul of Gerontius would indeed be gently woken on the morrow.

To address the one remaining question! What of Adrian Thompson's Gerontius? I have recently seen him in a number of brilliant cameo singer/actor roles: the Schoolmaster and the Mosquito in Janacek's Cunning Little Vixen at Glyndebourne, for instance. I have a number of fine recordings he made of English song, much of it by Britten. But to me none of that necessarily meant he would have the stamina, the weight, the authority, the passion demanded of a Gerontius. So it is with pleasure that I can say this was as fine a performance as I ever hope to hear. The voice still had the lovely bloom I recall from hearing him some time ago in Bexhill. The big moments ("Sanctus Fortis", "Take me away") were tenor singing of the very finest. Throughout there was a consistency and accuracy which I, as one who has done many broadcasts on tenors, applauded enthusiastically. It was his evening, and it was shared by choir, orchestra, fellow soloists and conductor (especially conductor) who gave the utterly packed audience in the church an evening they will never forget.