



Dvorák Saint Ludmila

The Halle Orchestra and Choir at The Bridgewater Hall

Reviewed by Matthew Dougall May 2016

Saint Ludmila is an oratorio by Antonin Dvorak and was the final concert in The Halle's festival of this great Czech composer's works, 'Nature, Life and Love'. It is also something of an enigma. Written especially for The Leeds Festival in 1886, it seems that it was written using the Czech language, as indeed the musical phrasing suggests this, the nuances and stress patterns of Czech being so vastly different from English, and with Dvorak, his stay in America still a few years in the future, he would have been far more at ease with setting his oratorio to the original words of the popular Czech poet and librettist Jaroslav Vrchlicky.

I cannot find anywhere anything conclusive which tells me whether or not the Leeds Premiere was sung in Czech or in English, but for today's concert they chose an English translation by David Pourtney, which for me, really didn't seem to fit the music quite as well perhaps as it could have done. The translation seemed more concerned in finding rhyme rather than reason.

This is also Dvorak's most substantial work that was not opera, one of his least well-known works and one that is certainly rarely performed. It is not even well-known in his homeland. Therefore to have witnessed this performance at all is something quite amazing, and certainly an experience to cherish. It is a deeply religious piece; one which Dvorak himself wanted to write to show the world how he himself was a confirmed Christian. The narrative tells the story of The Czech Republic's conversion to Christianity and so for Dvorak this was a very personal and heart-felt theme. Don't worry though, you did not need to be Christian to enjoy the music. It is just a story, like the Bible, you can either believe it or not, but it certainly makes a good story! It is a rather peculiar fact that most of the best choral music is religious.

One can certainly understand however why this work is often passed by. It requires 5 soloists, a large orchestra and mixed choir, and is just over two hours in length. However that is not the main reason. Or at least, I don't think that is the case. I do believe the real reason is that this work doesn't either feel or sound like Dvorak. If I had been given a passage to listen to not knowing from where the music was taken, I would not have come up with Dvorak's name. Listening to the music you can clearly hear that this is a very retrospective piece; the format, style, and even thematic progression is very traditional, harking back to the great Oratorios of the past. As for the music itself then I could clearly hear Haydn, Bach, Handel and Beethoven in there - not their actual music, that would be plagiarism, but their styles and influence was uber-evident.

The Halle orchestra were in truly fine form and played superbly. Sir Mark Elder, the Halle's Music Director and today's conductor, brought out the absolute best from every instrument. The

Halle Choir, under the superb direction of Matthew Hamilton were also at their best too. The beautiful melodious quality we heard when altos joined the tenors, and basses in a couple of sections were some of the most wonderful sounds I have heard this choir create. Their diction too was absolutely spot on. In fact, given that they were singing in English, and we were also given a booklet containing the lyrics (not the original Czech which would have been more interesting), I am at a loss to understand the need for the subtitle board too, which must have obscured a certain percentage of audience's view.

The five soloists were also magnificent. It is a very strange work in the sense that one tenor is needed to sing in part 1, whilst parts 2 and 3 see a different tenor, and the first one is consigned to the dressing room. Moreover, the mezzo-soprano has the luxury of waiting in her dressing-room until after the interval too since she opens part 2 but is unseen and unheard until then. The soloists in this performance were **Emma Bell** (soprano singing Ludmila); **Christine Rice**

(mezzo-soprano singing Svatava);

Nicky Spence

(tenor singing Borivoj);

Stuart Jackson

(tenor singing farmer);

James Creswell

(bass singing Ivan). For my money it was Rice and Creswell though who stood out just that little further in their interpretations of the lyrics and their singing, and Spence who had the most mellifluous voice. But that is just being picky. All five were truly wonderful, and together with the orchestra and choir, brought the house down with the finale of Wagnerian proportions and their final loud Kyrie Eleison.

This was indeed a concert that will be remembered for a long time to come. A work of incredible beauty, despite of, or even in spite of it being very un-Dvorak-like, a true gem of a piece nevertheless; and one that is so rarely performed that there really is no yardstick from which to judge today's performance. I wouldn't mind betting though that a better one could not be found.