



Big Bang!
The Halle Orchestra and Children's Choir
Reviewed by Matthew Dougall June 2016

Maybe the timing of this concert wasn't so great (Manchester Day and parade through the centre, and Fathers' Day), or maybe the inclement weather kept people away, but it was such a shame to see the Bridgewater Hall not even half full, particularly since this was a family concert. Although it was lovely to see so many families in attendance with young children, even if, in majority of cases the children were far too young, and started crying, fidgeting or sleeping during it.

No matter. It is always a great pleasure for me to listen to The Halle Orchestra. When they have an 'off day' they are brilliant, and when they are on top form they are unbeatable! Today's concert fell somewhere between the two.

The title of today's concert was **Big Bang!**, and the main work in the programme was about the earth's creation. However, the first half of the concert had nothing to do with this at all. In fact, in a concert mainly for youngsters, I really didn't understand the choice of opening piece at all. A rather odd choice of music which really did not grab the youngsters attention despite it being played beautifully - even if it was a little over-indulgently conducted by Sir Mark Elder in the slow romantic sections - but after the first strident entry had finished, and the slow and quieter section began you had lost the children.

The music was L'Arlesienne Suite No.1 by Georges Bizet. Written in 1872 as incidental music for a play about a young peasant girl from the town of Arles, the music was reworked and made into orchestral suites for the concert platform. This, the first suite is by far the more well known, and starts with the tune which is now a carol, to which the words are, 'At dawn of day, I met upon the way, with three great kings who went upon a journey' although I cannot remember the actual name of the carol for the life of me!

The second piece on the menu was Benjamin Britten's Young Persons' Guide To The Orchestra (op 34). Sometimes this piece is played without any narration, and works as a piece of concert music. It was intended however to be an instructive and interesting novelty piece with a narrator explaining the different parts and instruments of the orchestra during it. It starts with the piece's main theme - an arrangement of a piece of music by an earlier English Great, Henry Purcell - and then each of the four sections take a variation of the theme and then every instrument gets their turn in the spotlight, before the denouement, a lively fugue (again by Purcell) culminating in the main theme to finish.

In this particular version, the rather stilted and out-moded words for the narrator had been replaced by a more contemporary rendition by Tom Redmond. The Halle used four young

actors standing at various places in amongst the orchestra and between them they introduced the orchestra to young and old. The modern 'lyrics' were actually quite well written with some gentle humour in there, and the actors brought the text (and the instruments) to life. The four actors were **Farran Mitchell**, **Harriet Poole**, **Jerome Dowling** and **Declan O'Connor**, and all are recent graduates of the Manchester School of Theatre.

I had until now never seen a performance of this work, only having previously heard it on the radio or CD, but had forgotten in fact how boring the middle section actually is. Even done this way, it was not stimulating the youngsters in any way, and not just them, but I too, was bored with it. It only came alive again once the fugue started. I really liked the idea of a little acting from the orchestra at the beginning when the four sections were introduced, and so I am now left wondering whether or not it couldn't have been possible to have done something a little more visually stimulating when the actors introduced the individual instruments too.

However, let me come to the main event of this afternoon concert. It is a new work and today it was receiving its world premiere performance in the presence of both composer and lyricist. With music by **Jonathan Dove** and words by **Alasdair Middleton**, this was something like a contemporary take on the Oratorio. The piece, entitled, 'A Brief History Of Creation' is a rather substantial work and was written especially for The Halle Children's Choir to perform. In 13 small sections, the work takes us through one of the hypotheses on how the world started, from 'Stars' through to 'Rain', and then 'Dinosaurs' and finally 'Man'.

I have to say that The Halle Children's Choir have always impressed me, and today they certainly did not disappoint. A group of 83 children all aged between 8 and 12 years, walked in single file and took their places in the choir stalls above the orchestra. Impeccably behaved and disciplined, and looking very smart in their trademark red shirts and black trousers / skirts. This is the first time I have seen them so dressed. All other times they have worn a variety of single coloured, pastel shaded T-shirts. Under the direction of **Shirley Court**, the choir stood for the

entire piece, totally involved and totally committed to the work, and sang it all from memory. Their diction was superb. I could hear and understand every single word, and although there was a distinct lack of the softer and quieter dynamics in the piece, it still proved to be a rather technically difficult piece for them, sometimes two, sometimes three parts, and sometimes the melodies simply did not go where you would naturally expect them to.

There were a few soloists from the choir who either spoke small sections or sang a few lines here and there, but the vast majority was choral. Of the soloists - all of whom were excellent - there were two stand out singers for me, and I'm really sorry I cannot name you, but hopefully someone may be able to add or advise names so that you may be properly credited. They were, the girl who sang the solo part in the 'Sharks' section, and the girl on stage right with black hair who was the second girl to sing in the 'Whales' section. However, the chorister who stole the show completely was a tiny young girl who was standing in the centre of the front row, with short black hair (possibly of Oriental or Pacific origin), who was so animated and acting the song the whole way through. She caught my attention right at the beginning and my eyes kept straying back to her, so great was her commitment and stage presence.

The music was modern but not drastically so. It never became totally atonal or extremely discordant or enharmonic. There was always a melody, and I really loved the way that the music imitated the animal or element it was describing. We really did have monkeys, elephants, dinosaurs etc, and the percussion even played something (I have no idea what) with a bow in order to try and recreate as closely as possible the sound of whale call. Although mankind was treated to a Chinese-sounding melody on the xylophone, and part of the dinosaur theme was very reminiscent of a dance from West Side Story! It was a novelty piece in the mould of Carnival Of The Animals or Peter And The Wolf, but was delightful and I felt privileged to be amongst the first to hear it.

Once again, thank you Halle Children's Choir for your professionalism, dedication and brilliance;

and for reminding me that you are music's future, and as such it is in good hands. Thank you Halle Orchestra for playing wonderfully - as always. You never let me down! And thank you, Mark Elder, for conducting and directing with such passion and intelligence. I eagerly look forward to my next visit.