Thursday Series - Elgar, Casken, Ravel & Williams

The Halle at The Bridgewater Hall

Reviewed by Matthew Dougall April 2016

Prior to the evening's main concert, one of the soloists, the tenor, Joshua Ellicott, accompanied by Paul Jones on the piano, performed a short pre-concert concert entitled, 'From Your Ever Loving Son, Jack'. It was a very beautiful and moving 40 minutes, in which Ellicott read the letters of his great nephew, Jack Ellicott, and told his story, that of a young soldier, from signing up in 1915 to his death on the Somme in 1916, through some well chosen and superbly sung English (and one French) songs.

Ellicott had a most wonderful and sonorous lyric tenor voice, and his diction throughout was superb. With a photo of Jack, his great nephew on one side of him, dressed in his army uniform giving the concert more grounding, Ellicott paid a most fitting and honourable tribute to his family and to all the men lost in that great and tragic event. There was then 20 minutes between

that and the main concert, and so time for a cup of tea.

The first thing to happen once seated, was not one that I had expected (mind you, if I had read the programme properly I would have!). The Halle's Chief Executive, John Summers came on stage to welcome Joyce Kennedy of the Elgar Society, in order for her to present Sir Mark Elder with The Elgar Medal.

The medal is presented to those who have continuously supported and promoted the music of Elgar, originally only for those in other countries, but since 2010, nationals have also been eligible. It was a fitting presentation, since Sir Mark's joining The Halle (who incidentally gave the first performance of Elgar's first symphony in 1908), as he has been responsible for a huge resurgence in not just Elgar's but British music in general, and, as well as sharing the same birthday as Elgar, Sir Mark has a huge passion for sharing and showing us the greatness and troubled nature of the genius that was Elgar.

And now, finally to the music.

The evening's concert was made up of three pieces of English music, but started with Ravel's 'Pavane Pour Une Infante Defunte'. It is a rather short piece and seemingly a little out of place, also a rather odd piece to start a concert with too. Slow and melancholy. It also uses only a small orchestra, and so, before the next piece of music, there was long hiatus whilst the orchestra reconfigured. Obviously not my place to say, but I simply don't understand the reason

for the Ravel on the programme. Surely there are works of a similar length within the repertoire of both British composers and the Halle which would have been more suitable.

All that being said though, the orchestra, under Elder's baton, played it just sublimely. It was soft, smooth, gentle and lyrical, lulling us into a false sense of security for what about to happen.

Next to a work by contemporary composer John Casken. This piece, entitled, 'Apollinaire's Bird' is a Halle commissioned work and was premiered by The Halle on 10th April 2014, and tonight the same conductor and soloist reunited to play the work once again.
The piece is essentially a concerto for oboe and orchestra in two movements. Taking as his starting point Guillaume Apollinaire's poem, 'Un Oiseau Chant' which was written by Apollinaire whilst in the trenches during world war one as he became fascinated by the lively chirping of a bird juxtaposed against the bleakness, reality and futility of the war in which he was fighting; Casken has created a considerable work of huge depth and power. One clearly hears the bird's joyous singing, represented by the oboe solo, and the large percussion section gives us artillery fire and marching beats. Highly evocative and extremely moving, this is not an easy piece either to play or even perhaps to listen to. But listen closely and intently and it is indeed hugely rewarding.

Oboist Stephane Rancourt certainly had is work cut out for him, but proved more than worthy of the challenge, and both he and the orchestra under Elder's direction did justice to this substantial concerto by performing it incredibly well. I have never heard the piece before, nor have I ever heard of any other works by Casken, but I shall be looking out for his name to appear on future Halle programming. Casken was in attendance and came on stage at the end to take his bow too.

After the interval and we were back with late Romantic / early 20th century British music. Music for which Sir Mark Elder is famed and is unabashedly passionate. Both these pieces were being recorded this evening to be released later in the year on the Halle's own label.

First, we returned to Edward Elgar, and to a piece of music which he wrote in 1915 called 'A Voice In The Wilderness'. It is a melodrama. A piece for orchestra, spoken text, and a soprano soloist. The speaker in tonight's concert was Joshua Ellicott, sadly not singing, but this time, dressed in WW1 army trousers and shoes with a collarless shirt and braces he spoke the words of Emile Cammaerts' poem, Une Voix Dans Le Desert, in their English translation, with great passion and sensitivity, whilst the soprano, Jennifer France, dressed as a young French maid of the same period, sang her way through Cammaerts' words with expressive ease. It was not a particularly long piece, and again, this was a work new to me. The genre of melodrama - semi-acted dramatic renditions of spoken word against the underscoring of orchestra is quite unusual, and not often seen on concert programmes. Maybe there should be more, as it was thoroughly enjoyable, and beautifully rendered.

Finally to the piece of music that I had been waiting all night to hear, Vaughan Williams' fourth symphony. I happen to be remarkably fond of the music of Vaughan Williams and have heard this symphony played many times before, both live and recorded by many different orchestras and under the leadership of many different conductors. I would not be lying to say that tonight's rendition by the Halle and Sir Mark Elder surpassed all. It was quite simply the best rendition I have ever heard. Need I write more?! The observations of dynamic changes superb, the plaintive flute solo, and the frenetic denouement totally controlled and electrifying, bringing the work, and the concert to a fabulous climatic finale.