

## **Tonbridge Philharmonic Society**

### **Review by Robin Morrish**

#### *An English Prom*

St Stephen's Church, Tonbridge

**6 July 2019**

What a joyful evening's entertainment our Philharmonic Society gave us with their 'English Summer Prom'! The BBC, who originated the Promenade Concert tradition always presents a programme of wide-ranging, varied items – and TPS followed suit. All the composers represented were English, but the content could not have been more disparate.

After a slightly shaky start, the orchestra swung energetically into action with Walton's rousing *Coronation March*. Walton's music is marked by its strong rhythms and vigorous forward movement, which our guest conductor, Michael Waldron, grasped with authority. Indeed, the strength of Michael's control over his forces and the challenges of the music was admirable throughout the programme.

The striking variety of the concert was highlighted by the work that followed - Gustav Holst's *Hymns from the Rig Veda*, Hindu subject matter far removed from the English scene, although the ominous tread of relentless downward steps in the bass instruments continued the march element of the Walton. Holst's rarely-heard work was intriguing, powerful and original.

Both the Holst and Finzi's *Lo the Full Final Sacrifice* are challenging works, especially for the choir, who sounded uncertain in the more exposed passages where pitch was unsupported by the orchestra. The very hot, airless atmosphere in St Stephen's Church must have added to the performers' difficulties. Finzi's piece begins and ends impressively, but it loses its musical direction in the middle. As it happens, I had heard the piece as the anthem at Evensong in King's College Chapel, Cambridge, the previous Sunday. The rendering with organ accompaniment provided more clarity of texture than does the complexity of the organ version. The Holst and Finzi were strange bedfellows, Hindu and Christian mysticism in juxtaposition, but it all gave colour to the richly varied programme.

It was fortuitous that the interval followed, giving us a breathing space before the entirely different world of Sullivan's *Overture to the Yeomen of the Guard*. This is one of the composer's finest compositions, and again the orchestra addressed it with strength and vigour.

Particularly fine was the string playing, admirably led with authority by Susan Skone James. However here, as on other occasions, the heavy brass often predominated, presenting problems of balance.

Personally speaking, I found the rendering of Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens* too fast and somewhat rushed. Milton's poem is entitled *At a Solemn Musick*, and the composer has responded with music that requires a more dignified spaciousness.

From this point we entered into the customary celebration of the Prom tradition. The *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* was played and sung with flair and panache, with noteworthy points of excellence in the orchestra – lovely oboe playing, fine clarinet and cello solos, and a distinguished performance by the horns. The audience were delighted as ever to join in singing *Jerusalem* and *Land of Hope and Glory*, which bring the Prom concert to a jubilant conclusion. Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March* provided the framework as a balancing answer to Walton's opening piece.

So the Philharmonic gave us another richly rewarding concert. How fortunate that Michael Waldron was available to replace our incapacitated director, to whom we wish a speedy recovery.