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Review of a Concert by The Tonbridge Philharmonic Society, by Roger Evernden

Tonbridge School Chapel - November 25th 2017

One of the great strengths of the Tonbridge Philharmonic Society is the relationship between the choral and orchestral divisions. Few such societies enjoy the privilege of having two equally-matched teams of amateur musicians which both perform so ably. It was this integrity of ensemble which conductor, Matthew Willis, was able to exploit so magically in tonight's splendid performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*. Elgar's 1900 setting of the religious poem by Cardinal Newman reveals a kaleidoscopic tapestry of inter-linked *leitmotifs* in the manner of Wagner. Indeed, the work is operatic in its unbroken flow of solo melody, interspersed with reflective or dramatic tableaux heard in the choir. The conductor's direction of this score, with its ever-changing moods and colours, was masterly. He had an unerring grasp of structure, related tempi and just the right balance between rigour and freedom. Aided by three fine soloists, Daniel Norman (tenor), Linda Finnie (mezzo-soprano), and Dawid Kimberg (baritone), and the pure voices of the Senior Chamber Choir from Kent College, Matthew Willis was able to maintain pace in the development of the narrative, yet allow sufficient space for expressive interpretation.

There are, of course, familiar set-pieces for the choral voices – the demons, the angels singing *Praise to the Holiest* - and the climactic moment for orchestra and tenor where Gerontius is taken into the presence of God. What was special about this performance, was the sheer scariness of the demons; they often come over as comic characters out of a pantomime, but not here. The orchestral detail and the dark vocal tone with its relentless rhythm, created a truly threatening mood. In contrast, the angels' hymn had powerful brightness and momentum, surging along on its forward-thrusting chains of dominant chords and harmonic sequences. The choir is to be congratulated on its focused tone, balance of parts and the vocal unanimity of its vowel sounds. All this contributed to a really exciting and vibrant choral sound, easily able to match the large orchestral forces.

There was much subtle and colourful playing from the orchestra, both in ensembles and in solo voices. There are many challenges in this work. Elgar was a master of orchestration, and Matthew Willis was able to conjure a panoply of sounds from his players, yet allow them freedom to use their own interpretative skills in solo passages. From taxing and exposed unison string passages to full-blooded orchestral tutti, this was fine orchestral playing.

The performance was blessed with excellent soloists. The part of Gerontius is certainly demanding, yet Daniel Norman was able to appear relaxed enough to communicate this extraordinary scenario to us in a very personal way. The vocal control over the pivotal phrase *Take me away* was truly spine-tingling. Linda Finnie as the Angel sang with an astonishing range of vocal colour, from the darkest low notes to the triumphant high of *Alleluia*. Dawid Kimberg's performance, as the Priest/Angel of the Agony, was authoritative and tonally rich.

The text of Newman's poem is hard for contemporary listeners to identify with, but the extraordinary integrity of this performance was such that, for a couple of hours, we were taken into Newman's religious world and helped to feel, with his characters, the touch of a spiritual dimension which we, in our more materialist world, rarely have the privilege to experience.