

The Times September 2011

The Best of British – celebrating 200 years of Novello

Bach Choir, Philharmonia, David Hill
Festival Hall 20th September 2011

★★★☆☆

Novello has come a long way since it sold Handel's *Messiah* for sixpence. In 1846 the publishing house issued the masterwork in 12 monthly instalments . rather as though it were a novel by Dickens . and soon the entire nation seemed to be singing it round the piano.

An evening called *The Best of British* celebrated 200 years of popular choral, orchestral and film music published by Novello from *Messiah* and *Elijah* to *Goodbye, Mr Chips* and Tarik O'Regan. A pity there was not a note of Judith Weir, one of their proudest acquisitions. But it was not that type of evening. Rather, there were the inevitable *Blest Pair of Sirens* and an exuberant *I was glad* from Parry and a lot of Elgar, including Raphael Wallfisch playing the slow movement of the Cello Concerto.

Fanfares (John McCabe and Patrick Hawes) began each half; Aled Jones was on hand to tell us before and after every single item that this was the Philharmonia! And David Hill! And the Bach Choir, similarly announced through a very loud speaker system, obliged with countless Hallelujahs, and even sang one of the *Enigma Variations*.

Hill is not the first to think of a singalong *Nimrod*; but his Elgar arrangement uses the *Requiem* text, changes the orchestration very little, and gives sopranos and tenors quite a challenge. The Bach Choir clearly loved it. They sang with relish, too, in the first performance of John Rutter's fine orchestration of the *Magnificat* from the *Collegium Regale* of another Novello stalwart, Herbert Howells. Here, at last, was not pomp, no circumstance: just easeful language setting, tinted with harp, piping woodwind, reverent cellos and violas, and the brass scattering the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

Richard Rodney Bennett, as eternal trouper incarnate, provided the final *Birthday Music*: a brand new piece, busking and basking in the harmonic and melodic delights of *Happy Birthday*.

Hilary Finch