

A MASS OF LIFE

The Bach Choir / Philharmonia Orchestra / David Hill

Royal Festival Hall on 21 May 2009

There isn't an obvious association between Delius and The Bach Choir (indeed, I'm sure the composer himself would have been alarmed at the prospect) but they were, without a doubt, the real "stars" of this impressive concert. David Hill has been their Musical Director for over ten years and the rapport he's built up with them was instantly apparent. The moment he unleashed the opening *animato*, the voices responded with admirable energy and attack. I have never heard another choir bring off this movement, not to mention the entire work, with such brilliance. The large choral forces (I made the total number of singers 196) scaled Delius's perilous heights effortlessly – the ladies being particularly intrepid and impressive mountaineers in what, let's face it, is often cruel and impractical writing. There was an accuracy of pitch and a control of dynamics that, for once, confounded the oft-held view that a smaller number of voices can better untangle Delius's harmonic complexity. Not on this occasion. All the big choral numbers benefited from the power of a mighty engine and the opening movements of both Parts, as well as the great peroration of the final pages, were simply thrilling – at least, they were from my seat, nineteen rows from the front. As far as I'm aware, David Hill hasn't recorded any Delius, but I found him a sympathetic and idiomatic interpreter and he'd obviously done such thorough "note-bashing" that the choir exuded confidence, rare in performances of this work. Some may disagree but I found the *tempi* of the faster movements exhilarating – Hill drove onwards and upwards in top gear and without skidding round corners. Even my own *bête-noire* – the "la-la-la's" in number 3 of Part Two – were surprisingly tolerable and the choir sang here, and elsewhere, with great sensitivity. Indeed, I really can't fault their contribution at all.

The orchestra (90-strong, led by Maya Iwabuchi) was the Philharmonia, playing at the peak of their form. Again, it must have been unfamiliar territory but you'd never have guessed. Rich and powerful strings matched some particularly ravishing woodwind playing in the more reflective moments. The brass had a magnificently unblemished evening - apart from the introduction to Part Two, where the "off-stage" horn calls didn't quite come off (a difficult effect anyway in this particular venue.)

The soloists were the soprano, Susan Bullock; the mezzo, Susan Bickley; the tenor, Nigel Robson; and the baritone, Alan Opie. They were more than a match for the forces grouped around and behind them, with the exception of the tenor, whom I could barely hear and, when I did, seemed rather out of his depth. Both Susans had copious supplies of burnished tone and immaculate phrasing to offer, as did our Zarathustra who I thought established great presence on the platform. I remember especially his warmly evocative singing in the *Night Music* of number 5 in Part One and the great solo that opens number 6 in Part Two. This authoritative interpretation had the necessary *gravitas* and range of expression.

Another voice was also "present", that of Sir Ian McKellen no less, who, like some disembodied Nietzschean phantasm, boomed forth before we embarked, exhorting us to disconnect any irritating apparatus. However, towards the end of *O Mensch! Gib Acht!* in Part One, an undesirable supplement to Delius's supreme orchestration was heard in the form of an alarm or ringing-tone impudently emanating from the front stalls. The final pages were spoilt and I'm not surprised that Mr Hill glared. Why had this wretched *Mensch* not *Gib Acht*-ed, as instructed? An infuriating blemish to an otherwise splendid and memorable concert, supported by The Delius Trust and The Idlewild Trust. Good to see a full-page advert – and a most effective one, too – for The Delius Society in the programme.

Paul Guinery