

A Concertgoer's Review: *English Classics featuring Belshazzar's Feast*

Overture Cockaigne (In London town) Opus 40 Elgar, Fantasia on *Greensleeves* Vaughan Williams, Spitfire Prelude and Belshazzar's Feast, Walton. Bolton Symphony Orchestra with Blackburn Music Society and Bolton Catholic Music and Choral Society, conducted by Tom Newall, Baritone soloist: Louis Hurst, at the Victoria Hall, Bolton, 12th. May 2018.

From the downbeat onwards, Tom Newall was in control of this splendid evening of English Classics sponsored by Arts Council England. Although initially it seemed perplexing to have reversed the billed order of the first half of the programme, Newall's decision was judicious in several ways. Beginning and culminating the event with Sir William Walton's work gave the concert as a whole a cohesive element, and the majestic opening bars the Spitfire Prelude showed the Bolton Symphony Orchestra on magnificent form from the outset. In Ralph Vaughan Williams's Fantasia on *Greensleeves*, the melody, published originally by Richard Jones in London in the Henrician era as a 'Broadside Ballad', and later afterlives including the carol 'What Child is This', the composer incorporated the Suffolk melody *Lovely Joan* in the now familiar version arranged by Richard Greaves, (1934). Newall handed this lovely fantasia over to the capable direction of the leader, Anita Levy. The work showcased mellifluous flutes, delicately plucked harp, lyrical first and second violins and sonorous cellos and basses before the well-rounded recapitulation. Arranging the 'running order' of the programme in this way gave the audience time to settle sufficiently for Newall to then introduce the themes of Sir Edward Elgar's Cockaigne Overture, (1901), in a non-condescending manner, ('oboe and clarinet trills ... hammer-blow strings'), for the audience to later recognise. 'Cockaigne', thought to be the origin of 'Cockney', is in rondo form; A: 'the cheeky cockney', B: '*noblimente* melody', C: 'lovers' dalliance in the park' and D: 'military band'. This overture is a favourite of the reviewer, and the well-modulated performance, alternately ebullient and elegiac, was a joy.

This evening's *piece de resistance*, Belshazzar's Feast, was eighteen months in the planning. For this mammoth composition, the choirs of Blackburn Music Society and Bolton Catholic Musical and Choral Society, augmented by members of other Choral Societies, occupied each side of the circle. The orchestra was joined by two off-stage six-piece brass bands, each comprising three trumpets, two trombones and a tuba. Again, Newall familiarised the audience with technicalities of the densely textured score; for example, initially playing the jazz elements 'under tempo' to demonstrate accentual stresses, and his amusing direction to play (and sing) this section 'from the hips', rather than from the score.

Osbert Sitwell's libretto, based on biblical texts; Psalm 137 and the Books of Daniel and of Revelations, is narrated by the 'anchor' baritone soloist. Briefly, exiled Jews are subjugated by the Babylonian King, Belshazzar, who holds a feast at which he drinks from sacred Jewish vessels, whereupon a message of his impending doom appears upon a wall. Belshazzar dies, Babylon falls and the Jews are freed.

Belshazzar's Feast is challenging for orchestra and chorus alike. Walton felt that the great conductor, Malcolm Sargent, set the tempo perhaps a little slowly for the debut performance in Leeds, (1931). The same accusation could not be levelled at Newall; this performance, although brisk, was nonetheless well-modulated. All sections of the B.S.O. responded supremely to the richly orchestrated score, with its alternately elegiac passages, jagged rhythms, discords and jazz motifs. The sonorous strings, woodwind cadenzas, brass fanfares and percussion heralding 'Praise Ye', the eerie handling of the 'Writing on the Wall' motif

and subsequent sense of 'otherworldliness' accompanying 'The trumpeters and drums are silent' were particularly notable for the reviewer.

During the cantata's ten delineated, yet continuous sections, the choir have passages when they are silent, and in that the vocal score bears little resemblance to what happens in the orchestra, a highly competent conductor is needed to give good entry leads. During the entire performance, I detected neither ragged entries nor awkward segues. Another, all too rare, and much appreciated feature, was Louis Hurst's and the choral singers' crystalline clarity of diction throughout.

The final recapitulation of 'Then sing aloud to God our strength' with full orchestral and majestic organ accompaniment rightly elicited thunderous applause from an enthusiastic audience. I last heard the Hallé orchestra and choir perform this cantata several years ago, and in the weeks preceding this performance, 'swatted-up' on several recordings, including Slatkin's excellent version with the LPO and Thomas Allan. On Saturday evening, Newall's version, with the BSO, under the capable leadership of Anita Levy, the incomparable Louis Hurst, BMS and BCMCS augmented by members of SCS, was equal, if not superior to, that recording. Eighteen months in the planning, and approximately 35 minutes of truly outstanding music making.

Dr Stella Pye