

Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra's Night at the Opera

Reviewed by Robin Gregory

With the closure of the Congress for refurbishment, the regular visits of the full London Philharmonic Orchestra ceased. True, some of their finest individual musicians give small-scale performances to a packed audience at the Devonshire, but the combined sound of some sixty players would be absent from Eastbourne were it not for the work of the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra.

On Sunday 22 October in St Saviour's Church, the ESO was in cracking form for a well-chosen selection of orchestral delights drawn from some of the finest operas. Under conductor Kenneth Roberts, the opening notes of the Prélude to Bizet's Carmen Suite really sizzled, and his subtle use of rubato gave life to all its changing moods. The attack of the strings led me to think I was watching the Hallé in disguise, and harp and flute were suitably coaxing in the Intermezzo, as was woodwind in the Séguedille. The Toréadors brought the whole orchestra (led by Lisa Wigmore) to a pitch of speed and excitement.

So it was throughout, with orchestral excerpts from Cavalleria Rusticana and Samson and Delilah particularly well done. Verdi's last attempt at an Overture for La Forza del Destino inevitably seemed bitty because he squeezed in most of the opera's tunes without giving much thought to the linking passages, but that is no reflection on the players last Sunday evening.

An additional cause for congratulation was the singing of the one soloist: soprano Susannah Appleyard. Her range was exceptional, with the top notes rising above the orchestral sound as required, and due attention given to the composers' various demands. In Mozart's Exsultate Jubilate the coloratura was precise but unfussy, and in O Mio Babbino Caro, from Puccini's Gianni Schicchi, she executed the upward leaps without the swoops which too many singers employ. She particularly impressed in an excerpt from Don Pasquale, where she is required to reveal that she knows precisely how to have men in her thrall. Her change of dress, from black to a sparkling silver, fitted the mood perfectly, and she was rewarded with a standing ovation.