

## Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra's Dream of Gerontius

Review by Robin Gregory

'Gerontius' makes huge demands even on a professional orchestra's resources. It requires a choir which can rise above the wall of instrumental sound which Elgar creates, and three soloists who can tackle its operatic-style challenges. The orchestral writing is 'twentieth century', even though the work was composed in the nineteenth. Above all, the part of Gerontius needs a tenor with style, staying-power and intelligence. If no-one is available, forget it! On Sunday 24 April 2016 in St Saviour's Church, conductor Graham Jones raised his baton, and the miracle happened.

The long orchestral Introduction displayed the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra's strings, indeed the entire orchestra, in full flight, incisive and immensely moving. And so it remained throughout both parts of the long work.

Not only was the orchestra in fine fettle but equally impressive was the combined choir consisting of the Eastbourne Symphony Chorus, the Eastbournian Society Chorus and the Renaissance Singers.

Andrew Mackenzie-Wicks brought to the tenor part not only a beautiful voice but power, emotion and insight. Commercial recordings always feature world-famous tenors singing with great conductors: I have on disc names like Heddle Nash, Nicolai Gedda, and Richard Lewis; but at no point was I disappointed by Andrew's assumption of the role. The high spots ('Sanctus fortis', 'De profundis', 'Take me away') rang magically round the handsome church.

Jozik Kotz, seen recently conducting the Hailsham Choral Society, reminded us that he is a bass-baritone with a justifiable operatic reputation. As the High Priest, his commanding voice, delivered dramatically from the pulpit, was a model of how to sing 'Go forth upon thy Journey, Christian Soul'. Similarly powerful too was 'Jesu, by that shuddering dread' sung in his later role as the Angel of Agony.

Susan Legg (alto, or mezzo-soprano) proved to be just the sort of guide a soul might wish for in purgatory. Her upper register in particular caressed the air, and she was able to give human warmth to an unearthly encounter.

The choir became demons, angelicals or assistants as required, changing their sound yet never damaging the quality of their singing. And the orchestra proved itself well able to respond to Graham's direction. Full marks to the orchestra leader, Lisa Wigmore. One suspects that there had been some concentrated and clearly very effective rehearsals.

The church was full, the mayor was there, and the whole performance will long be cherished.

Do not miss the ESO's next two concerts in St Saviour's. On 19 June, the winner of their annual young soloist competition will play Dvořák's gorgeous cello concerto. I was certain when I heard Jamal Aliyev from Turkey at the competition that he was destined for fame. And on 30 October, another of the five finalists in the competition, Ben Goldscheider, will join the ESO to play Glière's horn concerto.