

Mahler's Second – behind closed doors!

On January the 20th I attended a performance of Mahler's Sixth by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Thomas Sondergard in St David's Hall, Cardiff. I thought that the first and last movements were terrific, real edge of the seat stuff and so typical of Thomas's approach to Mahler's music. However, I felt that the *Andante* might have been a little more laid back, ethereal, sad, a longing for what might have been, more of a calm between the two great 'storms'. All in all, though, another excellent performance in Thomas Sondergard's on-going Mahler cycle.

A few days later I received an invitation to attend a workshop day and run-through of Mahler's Second by a much augmented Abergavenny Symphony Orchestra, an amateur orchestra drawn from the community, on February the Fifth, to be held in Crickhowell, a small town midway between Abergavenny and Brecon. Of course I accepted. I was touched that they wanted me to attend, although I have to admit I wasn't sure what I was letting myself in for!

I arrived at the not very large Clarence Hall at 9.30, half an hour before the due start time, to find the place a hive of activity. Having offered to have some of my Mahler books on sale to raise funds, I began to lay them out in the entrance (foyer would be too grand). Within minutes I heard the strains of the opening bars – sounded pretty good. I opened the door and was gob-smacked at what I saw! The hall was packed with around 100 musicians, the percussion section having commandeered the small stage. At the other end of the hall is an equally small balcony where the chorus and soloists, numbering 37, would be joining the orchestra in the afternoon. The chorus, made up of members of the Crickhowell Choral Society, the Gwent Bach Society, the Unicorn Singers and friends, including a few from the Welsh National Opera Community Chorus, would be rehearsing in a local school.

Fortunately I managed to find a spot at the back of the hall in the cello section; one member jokingly asked me if I had forgotten my instrument! The conductor was Dennis Simons, and it was immediately clear the impact of his patient coaching was having on everyone concerned, hypnotized by his 'magic wand'! Without doubt something rather special was taking place with total dedication and a love of Mahler's score shining through the efforts of all concerned. They were making the most of their day, having paid for the privilege of taking part.

The time seemed to fly by – I didn't notice anyone taking a surreptitious glance at a watch! When problems arose, Dennis Simons went over the passages concerned as many times as were required, everyone responding with total commitment. When the lunch break came I fully expected a mass exodus – not a bit of it! The few who left the hall soon returned. Everyone wanted to discuss the score, and many buttonholed me eager to chat about Mahler, his life and music.

Two o'clock came and the chorus and soloists took up their places in the balcony. My next concern was the small size of the chorus – would thirty-five be drowned by the orchestra? As with everything else that day, I needn't have worried. The sound was superb.

And so, after an hour's rehearsal, followed by a brief breather, the time had come for the complete run-through, the remnants of any pessimistic thoughts on my part torn to shreds!

OK, it was not perfect. There were hiccups here and there, but the sheer dedication and love of the music shone through. Orchestra, chorus and the two delightful young soloists – Aine Smith (*soprano*) and Lowri Probert (*alto*) were inspired. I must admit that I have seldom heard the *Urlicht* sung so beautifully. I have to say that this performance moved me far more than many a professional one that I have heard; at times I was fighting back the tears, and all without an audience to play to – except for one 'gate-crasher'!

I was very touched when a copy of my book, signed by the orchestra, was presented as a heart-felt 'thank you' to Dennis Simons. He mentioned to me afterwards that his burning ambition was to be able to conduct a public performance of Mahler's Second. I do hope he gets the opportunity to do so for his reading of the score was quite superb – up there with the best. GM would have been delighted!