

## Doncaster Choral Society, Schubert, & Ralph Vaughan Williams

The Doncaster Choral Society's 2008-09 season was launched at Priory Methodist Church on 15 November with a fascinating programme devoted primarily to two contrasting choral works, both highly entertaining in their different ways and both affording evidence of careful and devoted rehearsal under conductor Alan East.

The first of them was Schubert's early (1815) *Mass in G Major*, almost sinfully melodious, as is Schubert's wont; the texts of the *Gloria* and *Credo* are considerably abridged but the *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* are more expanded musically and indeed are expansive and beautiful. I like the smooth choral singing and the accompaniments of the South Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra (leader, Amanda Roden-Martin), comprising here strings, trumpets and timpani, with organ (Mary Cobbold). Of the soloists (Debra Morley, Peter Wilman, deputising at short notice for the indisposed Stephen Liley, and Terence Ayebare) Miss Morley had the most to do here and she delighted the DCS's audience once again. She had a busy first half; as the Schubert Mass is little more than 20 minutes long she began proceedings with more Schubert, but very late Schubert this time. It is, I suppose, impossible to nominate one Schubert song as his best (from out of 600 odd), but *The Shepherd on the Rock* is not merely his last song but among the very finest – assuming we deem it a song, rather than an early 19<sup>th</sup> Century aria or a mere solo cantata. Miss Morley's committed performance was fine advocacy; Mr East was at the piano and the few glitches from clarinet obbligato player Laura Cant interfered little with our enjoyment.

After the interval came the Society's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary tribute to Ralph Vaughan Williams. For nearly half a century he was taken with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a preoccupation which reached its climax with his "morality" (opera really), premiered at Covent Garden in 1951. It was not an outstanding success then, but when I saw it in Cambridge three years later, I was bowled over by it and it was a landmark in my appreciation of the composer. For all that, it has, regrettably, never been prominent in the repertoire. A few years after Vaughan Williams' death in 1958 a much shorter – just under 40 minutes – cantata version, entitled *Pilgrim's Journey*, was made with Ursula Vaughan Williams' approval, cherry-picking the opera's best bits and it was this cantata that the Society tackled (the composer has similarly adapted *In Windsor Forest* from his 1927 opera *Sir John in Love* and that works well).

Like the opera (or "morality", if I must) *Pilgrim's Journey* is accessible, built as it is on various hymn tunes, though it is not, I imagine, easy to sing. I was much impressed with the choir's alertness and their versatility, apparent especially in the savagely sardonic *Vanity Fair* movement and in the moving final moments when Pilgrim (as VW insisted on calling him) secures his entry into heaven. They were supported memorably in some of the movements by the excellently trained Sheffield girls' choir Cantores Novae (musical director, Vivien Pike), who underscored the enviable reputation they have built for themselves. The orchestral accompaniment was again in the hands of the SYSO who used the optimal instrumentation of strings, trumpet, flute and percussion (with organ and piano – Ron Law), which produced much colour even with this reduced ensemble many great moments, not only for the flute and trumpet but for violin and viola solos. Of the soloists, Debra Morley had less to do, relatively speaking, than before the interval, though the short woodcutter's song was powerful in its simple appeal. Mr Wilman, while having no set piece solo, sang intelligently and positively and, most strikingly, Mr Ayebare impressed with the power and focus of *Into Thy Hands, O Lord*, a largely unaccompanied solo. His is a voice to follow in the future and not least in British music.

I was delighted to hear *Pilgrim's Journey* and while it can never be the same as the original opera it does give us so much of its glory in this potted form. Congratulations to all for their enterprise and musicianship.

***Orpheus***