

# Very commendable performance of 'Sea Symphony'

DESPITE the bleak mid-winter's night, its Weakness accentuated by the Government ban on the use of modern forms of heating, there was a remarkably large audience in Stevenage St. George's Church on Saturday to hear the Stevenage Symphony Orchestra and Choral Society's performance of one of the masterpieces of English music, the Sea Symphony of Vaughan Williams

Likewise, despite the chilly night, not conducive to the maintaining of steady pitch from either instruments or voices, it was, on the whole, a very commendable performance by the Stevenage Music Society's forces, led by Ben Belinfante and conducted by Peter Wigfield

It may seem churlish to offer any criticism of a performance undertaken in the prevailing conditions, but one must confess to being occasionally disturbed by orchestral imbalance between strings, and brass that wiped out some of the chorus's words, though to be quite fair I have to confess to some puzzlement about the acoustic of this church.

It gives us a good string tone but seems uneven in its delivery of the brass sound. In the back rows one has had (he feeling of having one's ears positively assaulted, whereas midway down the aisle everything has been equable. On Saturday I was midway between the one and the other.

## **NO COMPLAINTS**

However, it is the spirit of the performance that matters and for me that was beyond complaint

Everyone concerned in the performance seemed to have absorbed the very essence of Whitman's poem and VW's music and passed it on in a way that made one forget the all-pervading physical coldness

Soloists Gwenyth Annear (soprano) and Thomas Allen (baritone), both blessed with voices well able to ride the orchestra, were sensitive in their response to every nuance of words and music, the chorus sang as if they loved almost every word and note, and the orchestra, apart from the matter already mentioned and which may not have been their fault, responded splendidly to Mr Wigfield's direction

There's no point, or space, in going through the 323 pages of this score but I highlight the triumph of the performers in the symphony's magnificent final movement.

## **SUPERB**

"The Explorers" it is titled, its first words, from the chorus, "O vast Rondure, swimming in space " They floated the words superbly, to set us on that risingly ecstatic exploration of something well beyond the outermost planet of our solar system, but with the sea imagery always in the mind, from the descent of Adam and Eve from the Asian gardens, through the female semi-chorus's refrain "Wherefore unsatisfied soul," to the soloists' duet "O we can wait no longer" sung with deep feeling.

Then on into realms that brought Gerard Manley Hopkins Gerontius, and many others besides Whitman into the mind, and finally to that hoisting of the anchors - "Sail forth steer for the deep waters only, for we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go" to the breath-taking diminuendo from "O my brave Soul! O farther, farther sail!" to the almost imperceptible disappearance of all sound.

## **INFLUENCE**

I count the realisation of the every mood of this finale as one of the finest things we have had from our orchestra and choralists

Finally, a brief reference to the poet Walt Whitman from whose "Sea Drift" section of "Leaves of Grass" the first three movements of this symphony drew its words and inspiration, the fourth taking them from his "Passage to India" (no relation to E M Forster) His influence is worth noting - VW's "Toward the Unknown Region," the second movement of Dona Nobis Pacem ("Beat, beat, drums! blow, bugles, blow") a setting of "The Dirge for Two Veterans," and the fine Delius setting of "Sea Drift" The inspirer of such music deserves a mention.

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