

Southwell Music Festival
August 27-28 2016
By William Ruff (for the Nottingham Post)

Last year it was Mendelssohn's *Elijah* which brought the cheering audience to their feet: this year it was Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. Anyone who doubted that conductor and Artistic Director Marcus Farnsworth could possibly work such magic again must now feel certain that his supremely high standards of music-making are to be the hallmark of the Southwell Music Festival for the foreseeable future.

Elgar was a composer who knew exactly what he wanted. The score of *Gerontius* is crammed with detail about phrasing, dynamics etc - so much so that many conductors and their musicians can easily be overwhelmed by all the demands. But not Marcus Farnsworth and those he inspires. On Saturday the magic was in the detail. The performers seemed to be exploring *Gerontius* as if this was music fresh from the composer's pen, as if each phrase, each minute dynamic effect was to be relished for the first time.

The *Prelude* set the tone of all that was to come, as one motif melted into another; as hushed, tentative phrases flowered into confident assertions; as each musical idea was moulded and precisely placed within the unfolding drama.

Even religious sceptics in the audience would have been startled by the emotional involvement of tenor David Butt Philip (Gerontius) as he enacted the soul's spiritual journey. His voice was incisive even when singing quietly - and his full-throated outbursts were enough to pin the audience back in their seats. Bass David Soar made a highly dramatic appearance as the Priest, ascending the pulpit to speed Gerontius from this world to the next - and equally commanding and resonant in his role as the Angel of the agony in Part 2. Anne Stéphanie was exemplary as the Angel, combining vocal richness and clarity with gentle nobility, intensely moving when unveiling mysteries and when enfolding Gerontius in her loving arms.

It is scarcely credible that the young singers that comprised the Festival Voices numbered only 35, such was the weight of sound they produced, and the range of colour they projected, as they vividly characterised the roles they undertook: assistants, demons and angelicals.

And this sense of total commitment and focus was shared by the young members of the Festival Sinfonia, powerful in ensemble yet also responding to each other and their music with the subtlety of chamber musicians as they revealed the depth and detail of the score.

If *Gerontius* showed what can be achieved when all participants are totally and sharply focused on a common goal, much can be said about the rest of the Festival, its solo instrumental and vocal recitals, its choirs, ensembles - as well as a host of non-musical exhibitions and events.

On Sunday there were two opportunities to hear a programme of music centred on the genius of Henry Purcell, the 'eternal inspiration' for a range of modern British composers. The choice of music was diverse and daring, risking audience bafflement - but ending up delighting them. Britten's monumental *2nd String Quartet* concluded the concert. Those members of the Festival Chamber Soloists who performed it with such musical intelligence revealed every nuance of a work which astonishes through its melding of concentrated feeling and formal complexity.

Amongst many other highlights in this Purcell-inspired programme was the fiendishly difficult *Catch* by Thomas Adès, a piece full of outrageous wit, stretching to the limit the meaning of its title, the capabilities of the instruments for which it is written - and the virtuosity of their players.

Of the fifteen musicians taking part in this celebration of a distinctively English musical tradition one name deserves special mention: that of soprano Alison Rose whose vocal agility, purity and unerring accuracy revealed so much meaning and emotion in *Two Baudelaire Songs* by Mark-Anthony Turnage and in Britten arrangements of three songs by Henry Purcell himself.

Late August holiday plans for music-lovers have recently become much easier to make. The only place to be is Southwell.