

Wilmslow Symphony Orchestra

Saturday 20 April 2024, Evans Theatre, Wilmslow Leisure Centre, Cheshire SK9 1BU

A review by Darren Niman of GMS North and Midlands

The GMS UK is always glad to support amateur (or voluntary) music making, where members of a community come together in their spare time to rehearse musical works and perform them in the community. In the north of England amateur music making has had a long tradition - just think of Edward Elgar's constant commitment to English music making by non professionals!

One of our GMS North and Midlands members, an experienced percussionist and timpanist with a voluntary orchestra, travelled to Wilmslow in Cheshire to hear three works - one new, one little known and one very familiar to Mahler fans. This is what he has to say:

Worth every single penny and a great night's entertainment... that is my conclusion after a rapturous reception at the end of a stunning rendition of Mahler's 1st Symphony. When I went to the last concert here, the Wilmslow Symphony Orchestra were delivering and seriously so. This time, however, they have reached that level where we shall soon be mentioning the Slaithwaite Philharmonic, Stockport Symphony and Wilmslow Symphony Orchestra under the same breath. Their performance, discipline, presentation and overall musicianship were absolutely spot on, and it showed. Led by their wonderful leader Rosy Williams and conducted by the masterful, ebullient and compelling Tom Newall, we knew that from the moment they assembled and tuned, and Tom giving the welcome, things were going to be good.

There were three works.

Firstly, the Alamein Overture by David Meakin, who was with us this evening. He was introduced by Tom and took a bow. The work was written in memory of his late Father who fought at the battle of Alamein. It contained quite a mix of material, inspired by the secret preparations made by General Montgomery, also restless music with fury representing an artillery barrage and its aftermath, representing the sadness of the perished and the horridness of war, whatever its justifications.

Whilst the victories of Tobruk and other theatres come into play at the end, there is one striking passage which on the outset, takes quite a risk if it is not performed in balance and context of the whole work; The Last Post is quoted in its entirety but within the scope of the overall work is justified and was actually a stroke of Genius! Well done, David Meakin. You have produced a modern work in a tonal framework which really stirred the audience and made them think very carefully what war is really about.

In the troubled world we live in today, with its many conflicts, perhaps we do not need reminding, but perhaps, also, we do, because when history seems to be repeating itself, it is because nobody listened the first time.

Part one closed with a lovely work by a female British composer, sadly overlooked until now, due to old fashioned "values" of sexism and the unjustified abandonment of conservative styles of composition. Grace Williams (1906-1977) wrote her four movement "Penillion" written as a short symphony according to a Welsh tradition of playing with traditional and counter melodies between voices and harp, here of course in an orchestral setting. It is an outstanding work and hopefully shall be heard again in a live setting.

The second half was devoted to Mahler's wonderful 1st Symphony in D, a great starting point for those who want to learn Mahler. The orchestra did Mahler very proud indeed; speaking from experience (Timpani and Percussion). It is not an easy work to perform. Again, as in the first half,

Tom introduced the work in the context of what is happening in the world today, with conflict and natural catastrophes upon us, such as Climate Change. In this symphony, there is song, nature with bird song, conflict and anger, practically everything you would encounter in life, as Mahler said "A Symphony must be like the World, it must embrace everything".

This performance certainly did, including the somewhat tongue in cheek irony and sarcasm of hearing Frere Jacques in a minor key, with snippets of "Klezmer" style music thrown in, in the third movement, which Mahler, born Jewish, would have known hearing bands marching in the street. The first double bass did a marvelous job in its solo passages and the Symphony's concluding bars reached an apex of hope for the future, if not the present, knowing the prejudice Mahler encountered in his lifetime, even after converting to Christianity.

This was a compelling, worthy and memorable performance of a work which made every single player earn their stripes. They all stepped up to the plate. We can honestly say that this orchestra has reached new heights and long may this continue.

The next concert of the Wilmslow Symphony Orchestra will be on Saturday, 8th June, 2024. Find them online!

Darren Niman