

**Review: Elgar's *The Kingdom*
Hertfordshire Chorus
6 February 2010**

A hundred years ago, a performance of *The Kingdom* was looked upon primarily as a devotional religious experience. Listeners made careful study of the text, aided by such publications as Canon Charles Gorton's *Interpretation of the Libretto*. In musical terms this piety has translated into sluggish performances, which in their hurry (!) to fall to their knees have quite forgotten that Elgar has pieced together a drama about ordinary people, to whom quite extraordinary things happened. A glance at the score should be sufficient to tell you that Elgar is seeking to grip his audience (not congregation – the work was written for a town hall, not a cathedral) with dramatic events that move ever forward with great drive. Last night I had the extreme privilege to be present at a performance that, for the first time in my 40 years experience of the work, treated the piece first and foremost as a human drama. For this to take place in St Albans Abbey, itself built to commemorate an ordinary person to whom extraordinary things happened is somehow fitting.

Put simply, it was the finest performance of *The Kingdom* that I have ever heard, or can ever hope to hear. In David Temple there was, for once, a conductor who actually took notice of the directions Elgar has given in his score, and the result was a revelation. I went armed with pencil and notepad, expecting to be dutifully critical, but these were discarded within a few minutes as the force of Elgar's inspiration took hold.

If I single out Peter Savidge from a superb team of soloists, it is merely because his voice, commitment, and sense of communication carried all before it.

The Hertfordshire Chorus was a revelation. I've been singing in and conducting choirs, large and small, professional and amateur, for half a century, and the blend of sound, the tone, and consistent accuracy were something that I would normally expect to hear only in the best chamber choirs, amateur or professional. The tenor section especially, discretely reinforced by "guest singers", came across with thrilling effect, sounding for all the world like a tribe of Placido Domingos. If the section where the sopranos and contraltos are divided into six, spread across two and a half octaves, needed still more "oomph", then that is a minor quibble: Elgar, after all, was writing for a choir three times the size, and stiffened throughout with professionals.

The Forest Philharmonic played out of their communal skin, and showed just what excellence can be achieved by a mixture of professional players and talented amateurs. Sadly, the organ added a presence that was often intrusive, no more so than in the final chord of the piece where, despite being marked piano, it contrived to drown the rest of the orchestra. To some extent faults of balance such as this were due to the notoriously awkward acoustics of the Abbey. It is fantastic to see that so much money has been spent in making it an effective concert hall, but the sound still has a habit of going upwards, to land to its best effect towards the rear of the nave. Certainly in Row H the blend was bass heavy (and for a bass player to say that it must have been!), and the upper strings, despite their sufficiency of numbers, sounded distant.

But enough of this Beckmesserish stuff – this was the real Elgar, and a performance of *The Kingdom* of which everyone involved can be immensely proud.

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