

April 2024 – A Sea Symphony, Five Mystical Songs

Review by Andy Martin, Bournemouth Echo

YOU don't have to be a big fan of Ralph Vaughan Williams (and I am not) to appreciate the momentous piece of work that is *The Sea Symphony*.

The Grange Choral Society with conductor and musical director Simon Earl, full orchestra and wonderful soloists – baritone Robert Rice and soprano Daisy Bevan – delivered a brilliantly powerful performance of this epic in the incomparable setting of Christchurch Priory.

An audience of 400 were privileged to witness a real spectacle. There was indeed a whole lot going on. At times it was difficult to know what to concentrate on. It was all more remarkable given Mr Rice was called up at late notice on Wednesday after another artist had to drop out – so choir and baritone were only able to rehearse together on the afternoon of the performance.

The Sea Symphony, completed in 1909, was Vaughan Williams' first symphony and a hugely ambitious project, in many ways a trailblazing work with its closest parallel generally regarded as Mahler's 8th. The composer took verses from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* for the first three movements and from *Passage to India* for the fourth. His symphony paints a dramatic and emotional picture of the life of the human soul using brave sailors and vast oceans as the metaphor.

Together and separately the soloists were such a joy along with the serene and beautiful sound of the magnificent choir working tirelessly to bring the full drama, majesty and exhilaration of this most complex of symphonies to life.

The concert also featured *Five Mystical Songs* by the same composer and opened with Edward Elgar's *Give Unto the Lord*, his setting of the 29th Psalm. It was first performed in April 1914, just three months before Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, starting World War One. So the final words "the blessing of peace" were very quickly overtaken.

The Grange Choral Society was founded in 1961 by Geoffrey Stark from members of the Signals Research and Development Establishment (SRDE) – a huge part of Christchurch's more recent history and heritage. From these humble beginnings the charity has been delivering the most spectacular of experiences over decades for the public good. What a cultural jewel it truly is.

January 2018 – Lux Aeterna, Nelson Mass

Review by Christina Thomas

The concert on Saturday 20th January given by the Grange Choral Society was the first concert of the new year at Christchurch Priory, and the first of the season for the choral society, who were conducted by their musical director Marcio da Silva, and what a delightful evening it proved to be. The well chosen programme gave us, chorally, "Lux Aeterna" by the American composer Morten Lauridsen and Haydn's "Nelson Mass", with a short orchestral interlude in between - Mozart's "Serenata Notturna" for strings, uncondacted. Here Mozart contrasts a string quartet with a larger string section, including timpani. All three movements were played with flowing phrases and rhythmic intensity.

The Lauridsen had an atmospheric choral opening, and the chordal writing suited the voices and the acoustic of the Priory. It was all sung with good choral balance and warm tone, with clarity in the part writing and diction, and with effective colouring of the words in the movements. Good intonation

was maintained in the unaccompanied sections, though there was room, perhaps, for an even wider range of dynamics.

The "Nelson Mass", surely one of Haydn's best choral compositions, was an excellent contrast, with its fast moving music, keeping the chorus on their toes. With so many of the movements shared with the soloists, prompt and accurate entries are essential, and almost all were, with lots of vitality, particularly from the sopranos. The orchestral arrangement used was not Haydn's original - 3 trumpets, organ and strings - and the thicker texture did at times obscure, in particular, the tenor line, but overall this was a spirited performance.

There were four young soloists, the soprano Sarah Gilford sang with clear, bright tone and clarity in the rapid passages and she was supported by the mezzo Rachel Falaise, who produced some real contralto tone in the Agnus Dei. The voice of the bass John Holland - Avery, as yet, is light in tone and lower notes lacked definition, but as a quartet with the tenor Kieran White, the voices blended well together.

This was a very enjoyable evening - an excellent beginning to 2018

April 2017 – St John Passion

Review by Derek Baldwin - Lymington Times.

Christchurch Priory was filled to the doors on 29th April for the Grange Choral Society's performance of Bach's St John Passion. Perhaps less frequently heard than his St Matthew Passion (which was composed some four years later), this work has an even greater intensity as it recounts the suffering and death of Jesus and the response of the religious authorities and the crowd who stood by.

The choir was in excellent form, and the accompaniment by the Ensemble OrQesta Baroque Ensemble was rich and colourful. No fewer than six soloists are needed for the parts which bring out the actions, and the significance, of the various stages as Christ's trial, suffering and death as they unfold. These were all sung with great sensitivity by Sarah Parkin (Soprano), Fiona Mackay (Alto), Wagner Moreira (Tenor) and Thomas Humphreys (Bass), and Ricardo Panela (who sang the words of Jesus himself), Pontius Pilate and the disciple Peter. Between them they sang with understanding and feeling the arias which Bach uses to fill out the various aspects and the significance of this dramatic, but historically true, sequence of events. It is not invidious to mention in particular the vital part played by soloist Kieran White (tenor) who, in the role of "Evangelist", carried the weight of the whole narrative of the events as they unfolded. Singing from the pulpit with great feeling, but also (remarkably!) a good deal of eye contact with the audience, he brought to life the significance of Christ's death in a way which must have deeply stirred those in the audience who are Christian believers, and maybe challenged those who are not.

The choir clearly caught the drama and significance of what they were singing, exercising great vigour where that was appropriate, and showing a degree of sensitivity at other points – notably, and movingly, in the chorale which follows the moment of Jesus' death, recognising that, at a corporate and individual level, "more Thou could'st not give me". The choir's conductor Marcio da Silva is to be congratulated for the controlled and sensitive way that his leadership brought this work together. The whole atmosphere generated by what we heard was beautifully and significantly enhanced visually by what we saw: the cross on the chancel arch and the illuminated ceiling way up in the east end. It seems certain that, for many, this event will have been a not-to-be forgotten experience.

April 2016 – Happy and Glorious

Review by Derek Baldwin - Lymington Times.

The Grange Choral Society staged a special concert “*Happy and Glorious*” in Christchurch Priory on 16th April in celebration of Her Majesty the Queen’s 90th birthday. Performed to a large audience, most of the music had some “royal” connection, along with a number of pieces from the more general choral repertoire. Accompanied on the organ throughout by the indefatigable Christopher Dowie, they sang with vigour and enthusiasm.

Also playing a major part in the evening’s music was the 10-strong consort *Decadent Brass*. There can be no doubt of this group’s outstanding ability and the colourful richness of their playing. Their solo spots included an astonishingly vigorous (and virtuoso!) rendering of Henry Wood’s *Fantasia on British Sea Songs* – speeding up to a frantic ending as per the Last Night of the Proms. But I’m not sure that their first solo contribution to the evening’s programme - Handel’s *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* - was a wise decision: it’s a piece for string orchestra, and transcribing it for an ensemble of heavy brass instruments simply didn’t work. Later on, though, in some of the choral works their contribution produced an astonishingly powerful climax ... sending tingles down the spine! But, again, for quite a lot of the time there were places where the addition of brass almost totally obscured the singing of the choir: many comments to that effect were being shared among the audience during the interval.

During the first half the choir sang Stanford’s less-well-known *Gloria* with confidence and a beautiful range of light and shade. Later on John Rutter’s *Te Deum* was also sung with enthusiasm (if with one or two slightly dodgy entries!). But it was in Elgar’s extended anthem *Great is the Lord* that the choir was at its very best - and this also gave organist Chris Dowie the chance to use his exceptional skills as an accompanist. The final choral work, a setting of the *Gloria* by John Rutter, is as far away as you could get from his ever-popular settings of Christmas carols. With many discordant passages and intervals, it was a real challenge to the choir. The end of the middle section “*miserere nobis*” was beautifully styled and sustained; the ending was spine-tinglingly intense and impressive. The audience’s applause said it all!

And we had all been given chances to join in and sing – not just in the National Anthem that ended the evening (with Gordon Jacob’s rousing trumpet fanfares written for the coronation in 1953), but also in Vaughan-Williams’ version of the hymn *All people that on earth do dwell*. I think we all left with spirits raised ... even if it did take an hour or two for our ears to recover!

July 2014 – Happy and Glorious

Review by Derek Baldwin - Lymington Times.

The vaulted nave of Christchurch Priory was temporarily transformed into the opera house for two hours on Saturday 13th July when the Grange Choral Society presented a concert of popular operatic pieces by composers ranging from Mozart through Léhar to Gershwin – and, naturally, taking in the Italian greats like Puccini, Verdi and Mascagni. This was home territory for the choir’s conductor Márcio da Silva; but did it work for the choir and the audience? I should say so. The enjoyment of the audience was palpable from start to spectacular finish, where we were invited to add our own voices and sing “in Italian” - which actually amounted to “la-la-la”!

The choir was joined by soloists Grace Carter (soprano), Denver Martin Smith (baritone) and Vedat Dalgiran (bass). Each of them added their own touch to the concert, singing sometimes alone and sometimes with the chorus. The richness of tone in Vedat Dalgiran’s bass voice made a particular impact, and was the subject of much conversation during the interval. The choir, although not quite

up to full strength for this summer concert, made a huge impact. The pleasure they took in singing this repertoire came over strongly. And if one or two choir members who spoke to me were apologetic about their Italian pronunciation, they really need not have worried: the music spoke for itself.

On this occasion the choir was accompanied by the 17-strong *Ensemble Orquestra* (about whom, rather surprisingly, the programme provided no information). Having opened the concert with Mozart's *Don Giovanni* overture (at Márcio's breakneck tempo!) they went on to give splendidly colourful support to soloists and choir throughout the evening. They were joined in places by Chris Dowie on the piano and, in his own inimitable style, on the organ – notably in an extract from Verdi's *Force of Destiny*, and producing a spine-tingling climax in the ever-popular Easter Chorus from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* – which really did feel at home in this building. I confess that, as someone who is not a born opera-lover, I had my doubts beforehand about this concert. In the event they were totally brushed away within the first few minutes. The whole evening was an absolute delight and, although I wouldn't necessarily think it should become a regular part of the Society's calendar, I have to say it was a huge success at every level. Congratulations to Márcio da Silva for taking the Society into slightly new territory, and giving their regular audience so much pleasure.

April 2013 – Mozart Requiem, Lux Aeterna

Review by Derek Baldwin - Lymington Times.

The Grange Choral Society were in good form at their Spring concert in Christchurch Priory. The main item was Mozart's Requiem - his final work, left unfinished on his death at only 36 and completed by his pupil Franz Süssmayr. This was a vigorous performance, full of excitement and tension, yet not without its tender moments. The efforts of conductor Márcio da Silva to work on the choir's "projection" are beginning to pay dividends. The tenors, in particular, were noticeably more confident than in the past: although still few in number, they were out-numbered rather than "out-sung"! His ability to engage impressive young soloists with potential for successful operatic careers enriches the Society's presentation of major works. On this occasion Anna Rajah (soprano), Irina Loskova (alto), Peter Kirk (tenor) and Tristan Hambleton (bass) all made splendid individual contributions... As ever, the Grange Orchestra, provided a secure and colourful accompaniment; the four trombones employed by Süssmayr can be overpowering when modern instruments are used, but here, with such a large choir, this was not a problem.

The second half of the programme was a much less familiar piece: Lux Aeterna by the contemporary American composer Morton Lauridsen. Premiered in 1997, its five connected movements all set Latin texts containing references to light. The choir engaged with the essential stillness of the music which was obviously the composer's intention. To achieve this Lauridsen bases the whole piece, lasting some 25 minutes, in the key of D - though with continual but not unpleasant dissonances to which the choir rose well...it seemed clear that performers - including the 15-piece orchestral ensemble - and audience generally enjoyed it.

The response at the end of the evening clearly suggested that in the 15 months since Márcio da Silva took the helm he has won the affections of the regular singers, players and audience. This bodes well for the future. The Society's next concert on 13 July is billed as a selection of North American music.

July 2012 – Music for Royal Occasions

Review by Derek Baldwin - Lymington Times (edited).

To celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee this concert proved a stirring display of British choral works under the choir's Musical Director Marcio da Silva.

In Stanford's *Te Deum* . . . the choir made a fairly impressive opening accompanied on the Priory's organ by Hugh Morris, as they were for most of this concert. Herbert Howells' used the same text in his *Te Deum* . . . it is in another league . . . most imposing and sung, brilliantly, at the brighter tempo.

Elgar's psalm setting *Great is the Lord* is magnificent and sung here with heaven-storming power and a good bass solo from Jerry Laker.

Shostakovich's *Piano Concerto No 2* - a beautiful piece . . . a deserved reward for Jo Corbin's highly regarded work as rehearsal pianist . . .

Parry's treasure-chest of choral music includes *Songs of Farewell*; three pieces highlighting the Grange Choir's superb abilities for a cappella singing, especially those antiphonal effects in their divided layout.

Three Motets, op.38 by Stanford, Handel's *Zadok the Priest* plus our own contributions - *Jerusalem* and *The National Anthem* - were the icing on this Diamond Jubilee cake.

April 2012 – Mozart Mass, Bruckner Te Deum

Review by Derek Baldwin - Lymington Times (edited).

. . . the first under their new Musical Director Marcio da Silva. . . although still under 30 (he) has already distinguished himself as an orchestral and operatic conductor in various European countries. This background clearly shaped his approach to the two works in Saturday's concert.

. . . His stated intention is to "improve the voice production of the choir" - the fulfilment of this was clearly audible in all the parts. This is to be warmly welcomed. The full benefits were most dramatically noticeable in Bruckner's *Te Deum*. . . With large stretches marked fortissimo (or more!) this is an extraordinarily powerful piece, with colourful orchestration and a substantial organ part. The final pages were overwhelming in their intensity.

There is every reason to be optimistic about the choir's future under their new Musical Director. His experience, enthusiasm and declared emphasis on better vocal projection can only be beneficial. We can look forward to experiencing more of this at the next concert on 14th July when substantial pieces by Parry will be supplemented by some of the best loved items from cathedral service repertoire. Derek Baldwin (*edited*)

July 2011 – Parry, Elgar, Bruckner, Rutter

Review by Mike Marsh (edited)

There is a venturesome spirit within the Grange Choral Society; one that is prepared to try something different, and in Saturday's inspired concert they conveyed to stunning effect the glories of voice, brass percussion and organ under Daniel Cook's baton. Concluding with John Rutter's *Gloria* the entire ensemble plus the soaring soprano soloist Katharine Hawnt ensured this powerful paean drew a performance to match the ambitious scoring.

Parry's anthem *I Was Glad*, accompanied by organ, had that extra edge with supporting brass ensemble, the Grange singers revelling in the challenge. Bruckner's motets are gems of choral excellence and here the Grange performed six . . . some a cappella and others with brass. If the highest degree of polish was occasionally missing these were still distinguished accounts.

Organist Ian Wicks joined forces with the brass ensemble in an arrangement of Gigout's only well known work; the *Grand Choeur Dialogue* and quiet a spectacle it was, also in solo he shook the Priory's foundations with Walton's magnificent *Crown Imperial*

Elgar's *Great is the Lord* with bass soloist Richard Hooper and organ accompaniment was impressive but surpassed by Parry's *Hear My Words, Ye People* with the panoply of brass, chorus and both soloists in stirring form. A superb concert and hopefully something similar may follow. Mike Marsh (*edited*)

April 2011 – Dream of Gerontius

Review by Mike Marsh (edited)

What better time than the 50th anniversary to pause and appreciate the significant contribution it has made, and continues to make, to the cultural life of the area.

In an age when British choral heritage - particularly in the Christian context - is less-widely valued or supported than it once was, the choir's broad repertoire and continuing membership of around 150 voices, along with the high musical standards it maintains together represent a major achievement. That should be recognised, valued and celebrated.

(of the soloists) it was a significant fact that all three had sung in the Grange's last performance of the work in 2006. They are all performers of great presence and distinction.

Under the baton of Daniel Cook the choir responded well to the wide variety of timbre and mood demanded by Elgar's music. In addition to the full choir parts his score also often makes use of a semi-chorus . . . That role was filled by the Salisbury-based Farrant Singers, another of Daniel's choirs . . . Mention must also be made of the Grange Orchestra augmented to almost 50 players . . . they stamped their mark on the performance right from the start of the sombre prelude.

This concert was a memorable occasion for the society to look back and mark the achievements of the last 50 years. But, with the magnificent venue of Christchurch Priory, and interesting programmes already planned for the next two years . . . it also has every reason to look forward confidently to the future. D.B. (*edited quote published in The New Milton Advertiser*)

Jan 2011 – Haydn Requiem, Zadock the Priest

Review by Mike Marsh (edited)

The Grange Choral Society under the director Daniel Cook gave this flowing work a magnificent airing in the company of four highly experienced soloists; Katharine Hawnt, soprano, Carris Jones, contralto, Thomas Hobbs, tenor and Julian Empett, bass. Haydn's *Requiem in C* relies not so much

on high drama, but in wonderfully lyrical writing and splendid orchestral scoring, superbly performed by the Grange Orchestra led by Brian Howells.

Whilst a new king is not in the offing, the four *Coronation Anthems* will always be core repertoire. The Grange singers revelled in the jubilant *Zadok the Priest* with a spine tingling performance and gave resounding accounts of the others with the four soloists making an entry in *My Heart is Inditing*. And we can rely upon Handel when it comes to a finale; another Alleluia chorus that readily stirred the soul. Mike Marsh (*edited quote*)

The Grange Choral Society began its 50th anniversary year with a flourish as the opening chorus of Handel's *Zadok the Priest* blazed out with all the fervour the choristers could muster. . . That wonderful music never fails to thrill, and on this occasion the choir was amply matched by the brilliance of the brass section. . . . *My Heart is Inditing*, provided much to enjoy in the singing of the soloists, alternating with the choir, and in some fine instrumental playing by members of The Grange Orchestra.

The second work in the concert was the *Requiem in C minor* by Michael Haydn Here soloists . . . gave performances of the highest calibre, singing particularly sensitively in various combinations with one another.

Some of the most moving music came in the *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* sections. Once again, the choir sang all their music with great sympathy and understanding.

. . . There is no doubt musical director Daniel Cook is inspiring the choir to new heights. . . . as he begins his fourth year with them, the Grange Choral Society will mark its own 50th anniversary with a performance of Elgar's powerful work, *The Dream of Gerontius*. That will be an occasion to celebrate Christchurch's great good fortune to having such a notable choir, able to attract both top class soloists and capacity audiences into the magnificent setting of Christchurch Priory. New Milton Advertiser Review (*edited quote*)

July 2010 – Durufle, Brahms, Borodin

Mike Marsh

Daniel Cook certainly put together a varied and entertaining programme . . . with choral works from the 19th and 20th centuries interspersed with popular solos from Abigail Hooper (mezzo-soprano) and husband Richard (baritone), and a variety of two- and four- handed combinations at the piano.

. . . Durufle's 1947 Requiem . . . less commonly sung . . . partly because it really is quite difficult in places . . . the choir seemed unfazed by its challenges. In some of the climactic moments . . . they brought a fervour which was both appropriate and moving; . . . The tender and exquisite 'Pie Jesu' was a gem, sung at short notice by the young soprano Calypso Hetherington, with the haunting cello obligato played by Amanda De Jong Gleyndert.

In the second half . . . the choir sang Brahms Liebeslieder Waltzes. . . these pieces (18 in all), do not show the master at his best by any means. . . . Much of the interest lies in the piano accompaniment. . . their final piece, the robust and exciting Polovtsian Dances . . . With additional percussion played by Dan Priest and Max Doohan . . this provided a dramatic conclusion to the evening, the choir sang superbly, with a good clear tone where the music was melodious, and

throwing themselves with unstinted vigour into the well-known refrain that makes this piece so popular. Special mention must be made of the evening's accompanists. The ever-versatile Ian Wicks . . . and he even sang a short tenor solo. Joanne Corbin is a key figure in the local musical scene . . . nobody could have failed to notice her accompaniment of the evening's finale . . . Her playing was an absolute tour de force! Derek Baldwin (edited quote)

April 2010 – The Canterbury Pilgrims

Mike Marsh

Grange gamble pays off. The Grange Choral Society is to be warmly congratulated for taking a bit of a gamble in presenting a major work by the undeservedly neglected Sir George Dyson and for making it a tremendous success.

Dyson's traditional English outlook embraces a very fine ear for orchestral colour and word setting that gives *The Canterbury Pilgrims* . . . a lucid appeal.

The choral singing was of the usual high standard and if there was a degree of competition in a couple of the high powered episodes, this was all part of the drama so effectively directed by Daniel Cook. A neat touch emphasised the pilgrimage with tenor Hugh Hetherington entering down the central aisle.

His characterisations were superbly made, the dour Doctor of Physic ending on a marvellous humour to the love of gold. Robert Evans, baritone, secured supple execution in the brass-laden, self important solemn tread of the Sergeant of the Law and in the upbeat Franklin's rich orchestral palette with Elgarian flourish.

The *Wife of Bath*, deliciously sung by soprano Augusta Hebbert, was lightly accompanied and performed with boisterous good humour enjoying the seductive implications.

This is a fascinating work fully meriting the considerable effort put into this remarkable performance.

January 2010 – Christmas Oratorio

Derek Baldwin

Uplifting oratorio. Just when you thought the festive season was over, up pops Bach's Christmas Oratorio.

The glorious sound of the society and orchestra . . . embraced the uplifting opening chorus and performed the chorales with harmonious integrity.

Soloists were soprano Cecilia Osmond with strongly performed arias . . . Alto Andrew Stewart was especially effective in one of Bach's most tender arias, *Slumber Beloved*, while tenor Thomas Hobbs occupied the sustaining role of narrator with euphonious grace and bass Julian Empett's *Mighty Lord and King of Glory* was powerfully wrought.

The orchestra (leader Brian Howells) were superbly supportive with baroque trumpets adding impressive sparkle. Mike Marsh (edited quote)

. . . Like the numerous other cantatas which it was Bach's duty to compose and perform, these contain a mixture of narrative recitatives, solo arias, instrumental interludes and chorales in addition to the more extended choral movements.

The four vocal soloists were all outstanding. . . . From the simple chorales to the more extended choral sections, the choir sung with their usual commitment and fervour. . . . The orchestra's contribution throughout was both vital and outstanding. The use of baroque instruments - particularly the oboes d'amore and the piccolo trumpets - brings out Bach's superb writing in a way that modern instruments cannot do.

From my seat it did feel as if this concert didn't quite generate the level of enthusiastic response from the Grange's regular audience which their concerts mostly do. It never quite 'caught fire'. I suspect this had more to do with the music itself than with the performance.

For their next concert in April the society breaks altogether less familiar ground with 'The Canterbury Pilgrims', . . . music by George Dyson . . . It will be an occasion not to be missed. Derek Baldwin (edited quote)