

Review of EMG Cathedral concert, 11/04/15

A resounding organ-ic French orchestral potpourri

On Saturday night, to celebrate the rebuilding of the Cathedral organ with its 350 year old case, the EMG Symphony Orchestra presented an all-French programme of orchestral classics from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century to a large and appreciative audience. The attractive programme consisted of Fauré's orchestral suite of incidental music to Maeterlinck's play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy's celebrated *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, a free illustration of the Mallarmé poem, Ravel's colourful *Rapsodie espagnole* and Saint-Saëns' majestic Third, or Organ Symphony. Interestingly enough two of these characteristically French works had an English provenance: the Fauré was commissioned by Mrs Patrick Campbell for the English version of the Maeterlinck play, and the Saint-Saëns was commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society. Under Marion Wood's inspiring leadership, the orchestra has presented an increasingly ambitious and adventurous set of programmes, and this was no exception. The Fauré, a typically delicate and wistful piece, with the famous Sicilienne, was performed with style, with lovely rich harp accompaniment, although early on the string intonation and ensemble were a little suspect, and the flute solo was slightly drowned. The Debussy which followed was well done with fine interweaving by the woodwind, woodwind, of course, being a French speciality, although again the flute could have been a little more prominent. Amateur orchestras tend to find quiet works much more difficult to bring off, requiring absolute precision in tuning and ensemble. In addition putting two works with such similar dynamics together was perhaps not ideal, but the Ravel offered a much greater contrast and allowed the orchestra to show what it could do, particularly in the loud, rhythmically exciting passages. There were some problems with rhythms in the last movement, not surprising in such a difficult piece, but one cannot fault the commitment of the orchestra and the clear, precise beat and lead from the conductor.

The second half comprised Saint-Saëns' Third Symphony, not so much for organ but with organ featuring in two of the four movements. This was his last symphony of which he remarked, as the programme notes indicate, "I gave everything to it I was able to give. What I have here accomplished, I will never achieve again." It has become increasingly popular in recent years with the famous Maestoso theme featuring in the films *Babe* and *Babe in the City* and as a 70s pop song. In the opening movement tuning was a slight problem. Moreover the balance of organ, played by the Cathedral's Director of Music, Andrew Millington, and orchestra in the Poco Adagio, a dialogue between both, could have been better in that the former seemed too quiet at times, but that could not be said of the blazing, heart-stopping entry of full organ in the Maestoso, which rocked the Cathedral to its foundations. Saint-Saëns' expertise both as pianist and organist were very much in evidence both in the virtuoso passages for piano, some for four hands and well executed, and in the massive concluding fugue. We are blessed to have such a talented and ambitious amateur orchestra with well-drilled strings and competent wind, brass and percussion, which sets its sights so high.

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