

## **Cumbria Choral Initiative 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert**

'An Epic', was the verdict of my neighbour at the end of the first performance of Roland Fudge's new cantata 'Celestial Light' in Kendal Parish Church on March 27<sup>th</sup>. This piece was specially commissioned by Cumbria Choral Initiative for this concert. It was performed by the New Millennium Chorus and Orchestra, with a Youth Choir from Casterton School and Queen Katherine School, Kendal, with Nicholas Hurndall Smith as the tenor soloist, and the composer conducting.

'Celestial Light' sets texts from Milton's 'Paradise Lost' and from the Bible, as well as words by Joseph Addison and Gerard Manley Hopkins, concluding with a poem by a modern poet, Luci Shaw. Roland Fudge explains in his programme note that he is focusing on 'faith that looks through death' to 'God who is our home'. He concentrates on 'the certainty, held by all for whom Jesus is the supreme fact in history, that the glory has not actually departed from the earth, but that it is often obscured by a spiritual blindness' caused by mankind's rebellious nature.

Roland Fudge had at his disposal a very large orchestra, including two electric guitars, and equally large choral forces. His score confidently uses these resources to the full, exploiting the many and varied effects available. The result was a thrilling and convincing performance.

Singers and players alike rose to the considerable challenges of the score, projecting the words and their meaning with great clarity. The opening, involving very exposed strings and the lowest men's voices, was a little tentative at first, but as others joined them it all became much more secure. All the soloists, including those from the chorus, sang with great energy and conviction. The arrival of the Serpent, and the war eventually won by the hosts of heaven, was marked by the arrival of the electric guitars, played by Bradley Johnson and James Thedham, and the rock band. If it was a new experience for them to be playing as part of a large symphony orchestra, it did not show, and the whole effect was reminiscent of another setting of the War in Heaven by Benjamin Britten.

The use of a youth choir set at a distance from the main group was another Britten-ish touch, with the antiphonal effects very effectively performed. The whole piece built to a great climax at the words of the 'Sanctus', and faded to a firm and confident *pianissimo* from the main chorus and the brass: 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.'

The second half of the concert was devoted to Gerald Finzi's 'Intimations of Immortality', a setting of Wordsworth's ode of the same name. Finzi had worked on the piece for nearly 20 years before its first performance at the 1950 Three Choirs Festival. Its text is, as the name implies, to do with whatever future life we have, though it is not as overtly Christian as 'Celestial Light'. The reader is left to choose whether the Ode refers to a single life, a child's view of the life ahead, or to the whole sweep of mankind, from Genesis to Judgment. Finzi found himself drawn to the text irresistibly. He said that he did not choose it: it chose him. It is at times deeply philosophical and discursive, and, to this reviewer, it came over as an intimate piece which would be more effectively performed on a smaller scale, though I recognise that the first performance must have been on at least the scale of the Kendal performance.

In this piece the singers again worked hard to project the words, but there were too many times when they were swamped by the orchestra. A more gentle and thoughtful treatment at times would have conveyed Wordsworth's meaning more clearly.

During the interval, there was on display an exhibition of children's artwork inspired by the idea of the Creation, and of Darkness and Light. Pupils of Sandgate School, Kendal and the Lakes School had contributed to this very effective display.

This was a very ambitious production by Cumbria Choral Initiative, and it was well-supported by a large and appreciative audience. We look forward to their next project.

DGJ