

STANLEY SPENCER R. A. (1891-1959)

CHRIST PREACHING AT COOKHAM REGATTA: Listening from Punts (1953)

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Dear Christophe

His and I were very pleased that we did not have RFT tickets that evening, because if we had we would have missed a terrific concert. It may not have been 100% accurate, but the emotional communication was splendid. Many thanks for your work in promoting it.

Yours ever, Charles

REVIEW

**The Guildford Philharmonic Choir, Wooburn Singers and Forest Philharmonic Orchestra,
Guildford Cathedral, Saturday 13 March 1999**

The cathedral was full on Saturday night for what must be one of the most ambitious concerts of the season and in effect one of the most thrilling. The Guildford Philharmonic Choir, joined by the Wooburn Singers and Forest Philharmonic Orchestra, were conducted by Jeremy Backhouse in a daring but satisfying programme: Bruckner's Mass in E minor and Mahler's massive Second Symphony in C minor, the 'Resurrection'.

Mahler's second symphony is in some ways a problematic piece—Mahler himself wrote and then withdrew a programme for the 85-minute work, which encompasses a huge emotional range, from the charming Ländler of the second movement to the apocalyptic climaxes of the fifth, with its combined forces of soprano and alto soloists, choir, off-stage brass and large orchestra. It attempts a grand scheme and, in the last movement especially, can often seem disjointed or—for all the intensity of its climaxes—slightly hollow. Under Backhouse's direction, however, this was a compelling and utterly convincing performance. From the aggressive cello and bass figure that starts the first movement it was obvious that this was to be a good performance; by the end of that movement it was clear it was to be a masterly one.

The heart of the work, emotionally speaking, lies in the final two movements. The calm fourth movement, entitled *Urlicht*, was sung with gorgeous tone and just the right sense of innocence by alto Jeanette Ager. She was joined in the last movement by Katy Tansey, well-matched, but sounding slightly ill at ease, and by the choir who were in fine voice. The complex structure of this movement was paced confidently so that one was led through its reminiscences of earlier material to an engulfing climax—which with its roaring drums and tam-tam was truly awe-inspiring—and beyond it to a sublime and ecstatic conclusion.

The playing of the FPO was marvellous, gutsy and idiomatic: in particular there was some fine brass playing. The body of strings was perhaps too small to achieve a convincingly full-toned sound, and they did not quite capture the right 'Viennese' quality at the start of the second movement, but their ensemble was tight and they navigated the Scherzo's many awkward corners with ease, even at Backhouse's cracking tempo. No playing safe here!

If the orchestra were given chance to show their mettle in the symphony, the choir demonstrated theirs in the first half of the concert, in Bruckner's taxing choral writing. The Mass in E minor, written and revised over a period of some twenty years, was conceived initially for open-air performance: the scoring for wind and brass reflects this, as do the often bold musical effects, but there are also many passages of subtlety and calm beauty.

The sight of the choir ranged on high tiers at the crossing of the cathedral was impressive, and their sound was no less so. There was a breadth and nobility of sonority which was well suited to this music. They conveyed with skill all the music's changes of mood, some of which turn on a sixpence—for example, at the words 'et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum' in the Credo. Dynamic

contrasts were always effective, from the vehemence of parts of the Kyrie to the almost expressionless 'crucifixus', and there was some highly expressive phrasing in the Benedictus. The words were crystal-clear throughout with well-unified vowel sounds, though occasionally final consonants obtruded more than was necessary in this acoustic. The gear-crunching modulations which are so much a feature of Bruckner's style, and which so often can cause problems for choirs, were handled effortlessly (the fruit of much careful rehearsal, doubtless), as were the wide bass leaps at the start of the Agnus Dei.

Throughout this work, and the symphony, Backhouse's purposeful direction ensured that whilst individual phrases were given the space they needed to speak they were never allowed to detract from a firm sense of the music's larger architecture. The enthusiastic appreciation of the audience and performers alike was richly deserved.

David Bray

(David Bray is Managing Editor for Trinity College London, the International Examinations Board. Formerly editor of the magazine *Harpsichord & Fortepiano*, he has written for the *Musical Times*, *The Music Magazine*, *Music & Musicians* and a variety of other papers and journals. He is also active as a composer, conductor, pianist and teacher.)