

Mahler 8 in the Royal Albert Hall with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Just saying those words again brings a thrill and still an element of disbelief that we actually DID it! It has been a tremendous adventure!

Just walking onto the stage at the beginning of the choral rehearsal and seeing you all there alongside all the other singers in that vast arena was terrifically exciting. And what a fantastic sound you all made; even more thrilling when we were joined by the Tiffin Boys, the soloists and, of course, the orchestra in the afternoon.

It was a huge task to put everything together in less than three hours, but it all seemed to go smoothly and all was set!

I don't know about you, but I will never forget walking out onto the crowded stage of the Albert Hall knowing and feeling (not really seeing because of the lowered lights!) that the hall was packed. An amazingly proud moment!

People often ask me – “did you enjoy it?” – and I really can't answer that question, because at the time of conducting I am concentrating too hard on making sure things happen right and, in this instance, making sure that all 600 performers can understand what I am trying to convey and then give of their best. So, at the time of the concert, during the concert: no, I didn't enjoy it ... but afterwards and in the subsequent days I have re-lived it and loved it and, yes, thoroughly and memorably enjoyed the whole experience.

So what of the performance itself? Well, I don't want to be too analytical about the pros and cons of the performance;

But ... for the cons:

Yes, there was a seriously worrying moment very early on, near the start of Part I when things got out of sync between choirs and orchestra – scary, but fortunately I was able to rescue it and even people who know the work said they hadn't noticed any problem; and there were a couple of very, very small blips within the orchestra at odd moments; and Yes, some of the solo singing was disappointing in places, though I do not share the scathingly extreme views of one of the so-called reviewers. And briefly in parenthesis, whilst I am on the subject of the two reviews, of course, there was some truth in what both had to say, but

as we see almost daily, the great danger of the Internet is that any old Tom, Dick or Harry can expound and publish their views without any redress and without anyone questioning their credibility ... well, in this case let it be known that I question their credibility and their judgement!

And now back to the Pros!

Well, the choral singing was really tremendous, terrific contrasts in dynamics from the absolutely hushed whispered to the blazing *fortissimos*, delivered with total conviction and commitment; there was some really incisive and also expressive singing too and all mostly together! What I loved about it was the way we (Vivace) stepped up to the mark and were not overawed or outdone by the wonderful London Symphony Chorus – we matched them! Everyone I have spoken to since or who has kindly sent me emails has commented on just how brilliant the choral singing was – and rightly so.

In that choral singing bracket I include the Tiffin Boys who I thought were on fine form: well drilled and completely confident in their delivery.

The soloists were on the whole a huge asset to the performance – the three sopranos were particularly impressive I thought and I also loved both Susanna's brief moments of limelight and Michael's virtuoso section towards the start of Part 2.

And what can I say about the orchestra? What a huge privilege to be able to conduct one of the great British orchestras and to have them accompany us. For them to be able to assimilate that huge score in just one rehearsal almost defies belief. But that they did and I like to think they enjoyed the experience!

It was not a flawless performance, but I believe it really came alive – it really lived, it had the Vivace magic! All the contrasting emotions of the music came across vividly, passionately, joyously, lovingly, intimately and, in the end, extrovertly. I believe the performance had everything this work should have including a climax at the end which was almost overwhelming.

I want to thank two people in particular:

The first is Francis who has been amazing from start to finish, dealing with fistfuls of notes with consummate and unflappable ease. He has been hugely supportive of me and you in rehearsal, understanding and earmarking problems and helping out with solutions; and of course taking central stage at the RAH on the Sunday morning is no mean feat. Francis – thank you very much!

The second person (or people) I want to thank is, of course, James and his tireless committee. That committee has put in a huge amount of time and energy. Forgive me if I do not mention everyone individually but they have been indefatigable and devoted to the cause, supporting us all in their various crucial ways. Others too, who are not on the committee, I know have been working assiduously to make their contributions as successful and professional as possible. But it is to James we all owe a huge debt of gratitude: for his part in the organisation down to the finest of details, his dedication to the project and the choir, his determination, his stamina, his patience, his good humour, his support of me and all of us, his vision: having the idea in the first place and having the guts to see it through to its glorious realisation. I would like to thank him personally for giving ME the opportunity of a lifetime, to be able to conduct the RPO in the RAH in Mahler 8 – a dream come true! I think we have all had an experience that none of us will ever forget and our thanks should be entirely due to James and his fantastic team for putting it all in place for us.

PS. I hate to finish on a sour note, but there was one aspect the James did cock up on ... that was on the day of the concert when the choir would have liked to have shown its appreciation to him for all that he has achieved for us. He didn't write in to the script a moment when we could do that and the presentation, of a high quality bottle of wine, was necessarily made in the hallowed corridors of the RAH without due ceremony. But I think now our applause reflects the gratitude we all feel toward you James.