

## Down in the Forest, Something Stirs ... A Mahler Third from the Forest Philharmonic – reviewed by Craig Brown

... And stir us, it certainly did. But Mahler, of course, is not everyone's cup of musical tea, as we were starkly reminded while taking our seats for the Forest Philharmonic's rather fine Mahler 3 in the Walthamstow Assembly Hall. The two adjacent seats were marked 'Reserved' for the mayoral party, and I remarked, within earshot of the lady programme seller, that we would be in good company. 'Pay no attention to that,' she said, with a knowing smile, 'I doubt they'll turn up for Mahler.' Nor did they.

A lot of people did, though, and the event attracted a full and attentive audience. It also brought along my grandson Tom, aged sixteen and totally unexposed to classical music. Tom is the kind of person we desperately need to take on board, for Mahler in particular and serious music in general: young, intelligent, open-minded and with a questing spirit. Never having listened to a classical symphony before, he concentrated through 95 minutes of the gigantic score. It was almost as impressive as what was happening on stage.

Ranged before us, the oft-praised Forest Philharmonic had amassed a workforce of nearly 100 players, supported by the Hackney Singers, the Choristers of All Saint's, Blackheath and alto Leah-Marian Jones. Mark Shanahan, Artistic Director of the orchestra since 1991, was the conductor. For all of them, this was to be a huge undertaking, and there was a *frisson* of excitement in the hall before a note was struck. Tom seemed fascinated, just watching the forces assemble, and admitted that he couldn't wait for the performance to begin.

Now, we have to be careful here. No nit-picking, please. Let me say, unequivocally, that this was a tremendous, gutsy, zealous effort from a band of truly committed musicians. Clearly, they had practised long and hard to tame the wild beast that is Mahler's Third Symphony - how do you bundle all those snakes back in the box? - and, believe me, their passion and determination showed. In over thirty years, I've attended an awful lot of Mahler Thirds (and, yes, a few of them were, indeed, awful), but I have yet to be present at a flawless one. Too many snakes, too many yawning pitfalls. Shanahan's team, disciplined but inspired, earned respect and a refreshingly rousing ovation, because they were both skilled and fearless.

I asked Tom what he *didn't* like about it. Reassuringly, he couldn't think of much, except that it was rather long (which cannot be argued) and, in some of the quieter passages, his attention wavered, while he waited hopefully for the next storm to break. What did I dislike? Sidestepping the irksome details, I missed the first movement's off-stage band, for whom there was presumably no suitable space.

whose confinement to the auditorium denied us the enchantment of distance. Later, the posthorn solo (which did take place off-stage) betrayed a nervous struggle for the right notes - another snake escaping from the box - and I was rather glad when it was over. Later still, the children's *bim-bam* chorus really ought to have been brighter, less a confusion of muffled bells.

Beware of those nits. There was, after all, plenty to stir the soul. No-one could ignore those glorious trombones, dark, fulsome and superbly accurate. Indeed, the orchestra's brass were splendid throughout. Clear, incisive woodwind gave earthy support. As for the alto solo, Leah-Marian Jones was never less than thrilling, one of the most moving performances in this role I have ever heard. She was exceptional. Hardly less impressive was Mark Shanahan (a conductor with some distinguished credentials), whose control of the score and of the huge forces inspired great confidence in both orchestra and audience. His timing and clear directions contributed enormously to the evening's success.

The Walthamstow Assembly Hall has a radiant, rich acoustic which is well-known within musical circles and enabled the players to highlight every nuance of Mahler's idiomatic scoring. Within the recording industry, the hall's sonic qualities are obviously prized, for Decca have used the location and I note that Benjamin Zander's Telarc Mahler 3 with the Philharmonia was recorded there in 2003. It is all the more important, therefore, that the hall survives as a classical concert venue and, equally, that the wonderfully enthusiastic Forest Philharmonic, who have performed there for over 40 years, can continue to do so in the face of spiralling hire costs. Whilst this review is not the place to champion the cause of individual orchestras or performers, I would urge all music lovers to visit [www.forestphilharmonic.org.uk](http://www.forestphilharmonic.org.uk), in case there is anything they can do to help save the Philharmonic from eviction. On the strength of their stirring Mahler alone, this is the very least they deserve.

'What did you think, Tom? Would you come again?' 'Yes, I would. Let me know when you go to something else - only maybe a bit shorter.' Result!

Metaphorically speaking, a non-swimmer has been pitched into the Pacific Ocean and left to get on with it. That was inspirational.

In the matter of encouraging today's youth to listen to classical music, and with a parallel view to the uncertain future of fine ensembles like the Forest Philharmonic, hope springs eternal.

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