

Eastbourne's choral music-making is in happy and vibrant health, and Eastbourne Choral Society filled All Saints Church last week with a wonderful Evening of English Music.

Good amateur choral societies generally have a repertoire of about a dozen major classic works – Messiah, the Bach Passions, the great Requiems and oratorios – with about two dozen more on the supporting list. The Vaughan Williams Sea Symphony is actually on neither list, demanding large resources, plenty of stamina and an awful lot of rehearsal time. Eastbourne Choral were undaunted, and they pulled it off with great success.

A top ten of English composers is a matter of debate. Britten must be there, and Henry Purcell certainly. Holst, Elgar and Delius have a claim. Byrd and Tallis echo from the Tudor cloisters. (George Frederick Handel? Sorry, sir, EU citizens no longer qualify.) But Ralph Vaughan Williams surely has pride of place, and his Sea Symphony is his majestic masterpiece. This evening embraced Vaughan Williams, Elgar and Charles HH Parry, and it was English to the core.

The programme opened with Parry's huge, stately Coronation anthem I Was Glad. It can be rather a blare, but John Hancorn's nicely judged rendering contrasted its great climbing crescendos with its reverent, subdued "Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem". The anthem was paired with Parry's My Soul, There is a Country, harmonically trickier but confidently sung, with a great sense of unity in its dramatic finale.

Then, the first RVW of the evening – his O Clap Your Hands, jubilant and extrovert – and giving ample evidence, of the fine choral singing on offer.

Organist Nicholas Houghton was a busy chap, now forsaking the manuals for the podium and immaculately directing the orchestra in two much-loved Elgar pieces, each with motifs and themes which are in your ear the moment you spot them on the programme. (Try this at home: Chanson du Matin – lah, da dah diddle-a-dah-dum... Yes? And now try it with Nimrod – bah da dah dah da-aah dummm... Oh, never mind.)

Chanson du Matin was gorgeous: light as a summer morning, with delightful pizzicato strings, rippling harp, and orchestra leader Kate Comberti exquisite on the solo violin. Wonderful picture painting, and very English.

The brass and percussion had meanwhile – very courteously – waited their turn, and now in Nimrod, from the Enigma Variations, they were rich, warm

and powerful. Houghton's reading had splendid contrast, not building too soon and replacing the thunder of the final bars with a stillness and peace.

A most congenial interval followed, with the chance of a brief word with Eastbourne's First Lady. Our dedicated Mayor Councillor Pat Hearn and her consort Councillor Philip Hearn are close to the end of their spell of office, in which Pat told me, she has fulfilled somewhere between four and five hundred engagements a year. Indeed, they had spent that very Saturday morning breakfast at a charity beachcombing event! Madam Mayor, our town owes you much: thank you.

And so to the grand oeuvre. Vaughan Williams spent some six years writing his Sea Symphony, arguably his finest work and certainly a landmark. Previously Choral Symphonies had used the chorus usually in just a single movement, and sometimes as merely a bolt-on. Mahler No. 8 just precedes RVW in integrating the choral and the orchestral, as in the Sea Symphony.

Its scope and scale are huge, demanding on the chorus and pretty exhausting for everyone; but you cannot listen to it without being swept up, enveloped in the swell of music which Vaughan Williams creates. Based on the long, rambling poetry of Walt Whitman, rather a hippy before his time, there are truthfully moments when the music seems to lose its way.

But they are few. This performance was full of inspirational musicianship. I cannot ever imagine John Hancorn directing anything dispassionately or clinically: he is at one with his musicians, and they rise to his rising and falling baton. Both soloists were outstanding, Catrin Woodruff a thrilling, dramatic soprano and Adam Marsden a baritone with rich tone and great command. The quite superb Eastbourne Sinfonia, professionally assured and beautifully balanced, always supporting the singers but never intruding or overwhelming them.

The choir of almost a hundred voices will have studied and practised for weeks and months to achieve this performance, and achieve it they did. There was splendid clarity despite the sometimes cloudy texture of the music, there was excellent balance and tuning, and above all there was a oneness with the spirit of the music, its ebb and flow, and its lyrical and emotional range. A memorable night.

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