

Choir turns in an ‘exhilarating’ performance

Music / “Elijah”. The Llewellyn Choir. At Llewellyn Hall, April 16. Reviewed by Clinton White



Conductor Rowan Harvey-Martin

IT’S rather sad that Felix Mendelssohn only ever got to conduct one performance of his oratorio, “Elijah”. But the one he did conduct, the premiere performance in fact, immediately established the work as a favourite in the repertoire.

Indeed, after 10 years’ gestation, “Elijah” surely must be regarded as Mendelssohn’s masterpiece. It’s an epic work, telling the Biblical story of the prophet of the same name and exploring the many twists and turns that story brings. It’s full of drama and pensive moods, despair and triumph.

And the performance by The Llewellyn Choir was as brilliant as the work itself. Even with forces way less than half of Mendelssohn’s for the premiere, conductor Rowan Harvey-Martin extracted every nuance of emotion the piece demands, producing an exciting, uplifting and exhilarating whole. It was clear she knew the work inside-out; her assured command of the orchestra, chorus and soloists was nothing short of inspiring.

The choice of baritone, Douglas McNicol, as Elijah, was an inspired one, too. He played the demanding role splendidly, singing much of it from memory, immersing himself totally into his character. His powerful voice, regardless of the volume, filled the large auditorium with ease, his diction clear all the way through. The drama and emotion he gave to the role were profound.

The other soloists were brilliant choices, too. Soprano Rebecca Collins, mezzo Christina Wilson and tenor Michael Martin, all gave first-class performances putting the icing on the

perfectly-cooked cake. Treble Charlie Barnes had to wait until almost the end of the first half for his solo work, but when he finally got the chance, he delivered beautifully-phrased singing, even reaching some impossibly high notes accurately and with ease.

The orchestra, The Llewellyn Sinfonia, provided all the support at exactly the right levels required in their accompaniment of the choir and soloists. It was never restrained and always assured in accompaniment mode. But, in the overture the orchestra showed its true colours; it was in perfect balance, every player being aware of the next and producing a very satisfying ensemble sound.

Ditto the large choir. Even though there are uneven numbers in the various sections of the choir, the audience would never know it except to see it. The balance achieved was quite extraordinary, even through the many complex passages of rising and falling expression, fast and slow tempi and even sudden bursts. There were a couple of times when entries were a bit tricky, particularly changing into what I thought was 6/8 time, when there was the tiniest suggestion of tentativeness. Overall, though, this was a pitch-perfect choir of confidence, no doubt responding to the expert coaching of their conductor. It was in the 5th movement chorus when all of these qualities came together especially well

There are a couple of points where the piece calls for a semi-chorus. These were particularly beautiful, especially the angels' chorus in the middle of the first half – a magnificently balanced *a capella* chorus that was, indeed, heavenly as it echoed gently around the auditorium.

What an exhilarating concert this was; satisfying in every respect and thoroughly deserving of the enthusiastic and extended applause of the sizable audience.