

Concubines and the Choral Society

What will readers of The Wychwood be listening to this winter? What better time than now to sit back and enjoy good recordings of some truly excellent music! How about the oratorios of Edward Elgar and William Walton?

Elgar is well known for the *Dream of Gerontius* and the incomplete trilogy of *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*. The final instalment, *The Last Judgment* never saw the light of day. Augustus Jaeger, then editor of Elgar's publisher, Novello, wrote commentaries which have shattered my blinkered view of Elgar. Jaeger has identified a myriad of motifs running through these choral masterpieces -around 30 in *Gerontius* and 55 in *The Kingdom*. It reveals a great deal about the technical mind of a composer who can dovetail all these figures so seamlessly into amazing choral structures.

Belshazzar's Feast Jazzes it Up

The Israelites were deported to Babylon in the sixth century BC and suffered the blasphemies of King Belshazzar. The writing on the wall, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN, spelt out Belshazzar's doom and the division of his kingdom. This is a great work, but not particularly long. It does, however, contain many nuances and special, jazzy effects. Shortly before its 1931 premiere, the sceptical Thomas Beecham exhorted William Walton to include the couple of brass bands who were hanging around in the concert hall with little better to do. Walton took the maestro at his word and to this day *Belshazzar's Feast* is performed not only by a complete symphony orchestra with extended percussion section but also by two groups of trumpets and trombones positioned on opposite sides of the stage!

It was perhaps to be expected that Walton would chart a choppy course in getting his fairly radical work to the public's attention. Despite six months' rehearsal the choir went on strike because the music was too difficult to sing and the modest ladies of the choral society, refused to utter the word, 'concubine'.

Is that a Fly-swatter?

Walton, himself, viewed the whole work with some amusement and although he denied his librettist, Osbert Sitwell, the indulgence of finishing the work with a nursery rhyme, he added a touch of his own wry humour by conducting with a fly-swatter!

This work has a great deal to offer to the choral scholar, the jazz enthusiast and the brass band officianado. I can guarantee you won't be disappointed. I have a video of *The Feast* performed at The Last Night of the Proms in 1994 with Bryn Terfel as the soloist and the BBC Symphony Orchestra and chorus under Andrew Davis.

The Roseneath School of Music is now based at the Beaconsfield Hall on Monday afternoons. This is in addition to the lessons given at the **Tiddy Hall on Wednesdays and Fridays.** If anyone is interested in learning the piano, needs to brush up their music theory or requires some mentoring for GCSE or 'A' level music please pop in and see me at either of these venues, ring: 01993 774568 or view the new website at Roseneathmusicschool.com.

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