

Music for a Summer's Evening

Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra chose a thoroughly tuneful programme for their concert at St Saviour's on 30 June 2019. Conductor Graham Jones and Leader Lisa Wigmore seemed to draw inspiration from the weather, and the instrumentalists within the sizeable orchestra were at the height of their form.

Nicolai's ten-minute overture for 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' is, alas, all we in Britain hear of his charming opera nowadays, though it retains its success in German opera houses. Incredibly, Vienna declined the opera's premiere but Berlin was enthusiastic. Sadly, Nicolai died of a stroke shortly after the first performance. Hearing the ESO's sparkling rendition I wondered why the entire work (which is based on Shakespeare, of course) does not get an English-language production here.

Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the 'Pastoral', can be read as a five-movement stroll. We experience the happy feelings of arriving in the countryside, we amble beside a brook where we hear and identify birdsong, we come upon a gathering of country-folk enjoying some native dances, then, alas, a storm breaks bringing thunder, lightning and rain, before the return of calmer weather introduces a shepherd's song. All this was made clear in the orchestra's performance. Even the flute, oboe and clarinet brought out their 'birdsong' music with accuracy and clarity. This was Beethoven at his most personal.

After the interval, we had a suite from Bizet's opera 'Carmen' which teems with good tunes, despite its tragic conclusion. Although I searched every textbook I possess, I have not been able to discover whether Bizet himself compiled these delicious suites. It seems unlikely since he died so soon after the first performance. Suffice to say, the ESO perfectly brought out the gypsy rhythms and the feel of the bullring.

Butterworth was another early death. He died in 1916 on the Somme, and Vaughan Williams lost a great friend. 'The Banks of Green Willow' and his wonderful settings of Housman poems suggest that Britain lost a potential composer of the first rank when the war-to-end wars (ha! ha!) claimed George Butterworth MC. Graham's orchestra did him justice as clarinet, flute and harp sang their sad songs.

The evening ended in the pomp of royalty with William Walton's Coronation March 'Crown Imperial'. Not surprisingly, the concluding applause was loud and prolonged. It was well-deserved.

So we look forward to the ESO's autumn concert on Sunday 20 October in St Saviour's Church when the winner of their annual competition, violinist Lucilla Rose Mariotti, will play the Sibelius Violin Concerto. And 2020 sees the orchestra celebrate its 40th birthday.

Robin Gregory