



**...one can hardly imagine it being bettered.**

For their spring concert, the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society presented Elgar's oratorio, *The Kingdom*, which recounts the beginnings of the Apostles ministry. It is less often performed than the composer's first essay in this field, *The Dream of Gerontius*, for no immediately apparent reason. The conductor, Matthew Owens made a persuasive case for the later piece, skilfully steering his forces through a performance of considerable passion and commitment. From the opening Prelude to the closing easeful bars he brought out the work's dramatic contrasts.

The chorus rose to the demands placed upon them with incisive attack and clear diction. The sopranos coped admirably with the high tessitura of their part, producing some fine legato phrasing. There were many thrilling moments during the evening. In particular, in the section in Part II, "In Solomon's Porch" the drama was convincingly conveyed. In contrast, the closing pages of the work were given due sensitivity.

There was a strong team of soloists. Mary, the Virgin was sung by soprano Jane Irwin who possesses a warm powerful voice. This she used to great effect in her Part IV solo, "The sun goeth down", which she began in reflective mood building to an impressive climax. Mary Magdalena was sung by Kathryn Rudge, her lovely instrument blending well the soprano in their duets. In her Part IV recitative her voice was perhaps a little light given Elgar's heavy scoring. The tenor, Peter Auty, took the part of John and produced some thrilling high notes. The most substantial part is that of Peter which was sung with great power and authority by the bass, David Kempster. His is a voice of operatic proportions and filled the cathedral to great effect and with excellent diction.

The Southern Sinfonia gave a most satisfactory account of this difficult score, their expressive playing of the Prelude effectively setting the scene for the whole work. Throughout the evening, the strings produced a full sound yet were not found wanting in the more subtle passages. Elgar's writing for woodwind was well exemplified and the brass had a field day. In particular the horns clearly relished their opportunities to shine! If, at times the balance was in the orchestra's favour, this was probably due to the scoring.

This was a most exciting account of the oratorio and one can hardly imagine it being bettered. Congratulations are due, yet again, to Matthew Owens for his sterling work with the Society.

**Brendan Sadler, March 2015**