

Review Mahler 8 Symphony Norwich Showground 21 May 2016

Norwich Philharmonic Society celebrated its 175th season in truly spectacular style on Saturday with a performance of Mahler's 8th symphony, the Symphony of a Thousand, so called because of its colossal forces; multiple choirs, eight solo singers and a huge orchestra. Maybe not a thousand performers, but a capacity audience of almost twice that amount in the vast arena of the Norwich Showground: surely a mark of how much the city values its vibrant musical culture and its heritage.

Mahler 8 is the first wholly choral symphony, and the choral forces involved: Norwich Philharmonic, King's Lynn Festival, Sheringham and Cromer and Norwich Cathedral choirs, responded to the music's varied demands magnificently, from the initial tremendous outburst of *veni creator spiritus* to the magical final *chorus mysticus*.

The excellent team of soloists, sopranos Kirstin Sharpin, Katherine Broderick and Catherine May, mezzos Anne Marie Gibbons and Anna Burford, tenor Peter Wedd, baritone James Harrison and bass Richard Wiegold were equally brilliant, though Mahler's taxing vocal writing produced the occasional harsh sounds from the sopranos, though not from Catherine May's less taxing, but exquisite, Gretchen.

The combined orchestral forces of the Norwich Phil and the Academy of St Thomas, plus numerous extras, played superbly, though the fine detail of some of the quieter episodes was sometimes lost in what proved to be a surprisingly dead acoustic.

Highest praise to conductor Matthew Andrews, whose impeccable conducting and control over these vast forces made this such a memorable performance. There was a tremendous sense of occasion throughout the evening, and the spontaneous standing ovation at the end said it all.

Frank Cliff