

EIF – Mahler's Fifth Symphony at The Usher Hall

The final collaboration between Sir Mark Elder, CH, CBE, as music director and The Hallé was a triumph.

And it was obviously the place to be, as the sold out concert was attended by not only the Rt Hon Lord Provost and the Provost Consort, but by TRH The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh as well as Dame Janet Baker. (Some members of the audience said afterwards 90 year-old Dame Janet was in the front row of the stalls, but she did not make a "public" appearance.)

The first part was a recital of Lili Boulanger's rarely performed Psalm 130 which uses voice, organ, and sarrusophone as well as a full orchestra. The Edinburgh Festival Chorus acquitted themselves with their usual brilliance alongside the splendid voices of Mezzo Soprano Anna Stéphany and Tenor Magnus Walker.

In the second half of the concert, (after an interval when HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh who is patron of the orchestra, attended a private reception, and the stage seating and instruments were rearranged), Sir Mark and the orchestra presented a flawless Fifth Symphony by Gustav Mahler. The brass was crisp, the horns, woodwinds, and harp played to perfection, the strings and percussion spot on. The sound was so full that it thoroughly demonstrated the fine acoustics of the Usher Hall. The piece is long, but that superb baton kept me enthralled throughout.

In a farewell speech Sir Mark explained that it was in Edinburgh he first heard Dame Janet Baker sing, managing to secure the last two tickets for her performance during the festival. Some years later they began to work together and have become “such wonderful friends”. Pleading that the musical arts be reinvigorated, he said: “This is one of the great halls in the British Islands. It has the perfect balance of intimacy and scale. Everybody has a good sound and everybody has good sight. Keep this festival alive! Keep music coming.”

He then left his farewell as a rendition of Edward Elgar’s ‘Sospiri’ Adagio for Strings Harp and Organ. A divine denouement to a long and productive partnership, although his career with the Hallé does not end here completely as he is to be Conductor Emeritus, while Kahchun Wong becomes Principal Conductor.

<https://www.eif.co.uk/events/mahlers-fifth-symphony>

And mention must be made of the fabulous brass bands playing outside the Usher Hall before the concert – what a wonderful warm welcome to the area of Edinburgh where culture and arts is in plentiful supply this Festival.







