

Halle Orchestra's performance of Mahler Symphony No. 9 on 21 September 2023.

We are always delighted to hear about our members' concert-going activities. This contribution is from a GMS UK North and Midlands committee member, Darren Niman.

"It was a privilege and a moment of history, to be at the Bridgewater Hall on Thursday, 21st September for the start of the last season of Sir Mark Elder's tenure as Music Director of Manchester's fine Halle Orchestra. The evening comprised one work, but WHAT a work, Mahler's heart-wrenching 9th Symphony, composed between 1908 and 1909.

There was a pre-concert talk with one of the largest audiences I have ever seen at the Bridgewater Hall, where Sir Mark gave us his deep personal convictions about the Symphony and his preferred layout for the orchestra - with the first and second violins placed on the Left and Right sides of the platform - for the best balance of instrumental sound.

Addressing the notion that the Symphony was Mahler's so-called "Farewell to Life", Sir Mark told the audience that nothing could be further from the truth: "I have never believed that!" Mahler, he said, had much work still to complete after the composition of this work, but the composer passed away in May 1911 without ever hearing his Ninth Symphony performed. The work's ending is usually interpreted as his conscious farewell to the world, as it was composed following the death of his beloved daughter Maria Anna in 1907 and following the diagnosis of his fatal heart condition. However, this notion is disputed in as much as Mahler felt that he was in good health at the time of composition of the Ninth Symphony; he had had a very successful season (1909-10) as the conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and, before that, at the Metropolitan Opera (New York). In his last letters Mahler indicated that he was looking forward to an extensive tour with the orchestra for the 1910-11 season. Moreover, Mahler worked on his unfinished Tenth Symphony, until his death from endocarditis in May 1911.

As for the performance, Sir Mark and the Halle performed this to an excellent standard with everything present. Cold, harshness, warmth, radiance, intensity, extreme emotion, raging madness especially in the 3rd movement (Rondo-Burleske: Allegro assai. Sehr trotzig), blinding sunlight, overpowering darkness, glimpses of ecstasy, staring into the abyss ... eventually ending in those closing pages, where everything seems to drift away in quiet threads of sound disappearing into the ether, in solemn resignation, acceptance of fate and of the inevitable. After Mahler has quoted his own "Kindertotenlieder", the work closes on a quiet chord of D flat major in the strings.

At the Bridgewater Hall, the moments between the final notes and the tumultuous reception were heart-stopping. There was complete silence; many audience members were moist-eyed. Before the concert, David Butler the Chief Executive of the Halle Orchestra had said that the evening would be one of those "I was there" moments where you live through history being made. Indeed, this evening will be remembered for a very long time.

In my opinion, it is not unreasonable to equate the legacy of Sir Mark Elder with that of Sir John Barbirolli; their achievements are equally great.

The evening was truly a magical event, a testament to the skills and talents of not only Sir Mark and the Halle, but also to the support and administrative staff, the librarian, orchestra manager and all staff behind the scenes. WELL DONE -A MAGNIFICENT ACHIEVEMENT!"

Darren Niman