

From Sussex World

Worthing concert - a deserved salute for a bold conductor

Worthing Symphony Orchestra at Assembly Hall. Review by Richard Amey.

By Phil Hewitt

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'Salute The Brave' concert for Remembrance Day. Worthing Symphony Orchestra at Assembly Hall, Sunday 13 November (2.45); leader Julian Leaper, conductor John Gibbons, mezzo soprano* Harriet Williams. William Alwyn, Symphony No 5 (Hydriotaphia). Edward Elgar, Sea Pictures*: Sea Slumber (Roden Noel), In Haven (Lady Alice Elgar), Sabbath Morning at Sea (Elizabeth Barrett Browning), Where Corals Lie (Dr Richard Garnett), The Swimmer (Adam Lindsay Gordon). Eric Coates, Dambusters' March. Sheldon Bair, Homefront 1944*(world premier). Ralph Vaughan Williams, A Pastoral Symphony*

After the interval, a hugely famous film theme, Elgar-influenced, glorifying new allied war weaponry and daring deed of delivery. Coates's Dambusters bomber squadron lifted the concert airborne, leaving The Sleepy Lagoon far below on its desert island. Hanging above the orchestra were four forces flags and a silhouetted soldiers-and-poppy banner, the Assembly Hall just 50 yards from Worthing's war memorial. WSO were exuberant, loud and proud. The audience cheered. Next, something lasting nine concentrated minutes was heard in the world for the first time: American composer Sheldon Bair had a deeply poignant family wartime letter to convey in his The Homefront 1944. Tragedy and loss impending, the singer – a mother awaiting news of a missing airman son and telling her sister in a letter – again drew intent listening. Bair's musical voice connected comfortably and a deliberately exposed single American expletive was the only shock in a work of tense beauty, preparatory to what came next.

In the Bair premiere, Williams became its first interpreter. Bair meets Gibbons at Northampton's annual Malcolm Arnold Festival and hails from Maryland's Harford County with a decorated career in music education. But he conducts the Susquehanna Symphony Orchestra he founded and, alongside those commitments, composes. In *The Homefront 1944* (begun in 2017), a missing-in-action son Gene, whose last take-off left behind an aerodrome in Norwich (the city of Sea Pictures' 1899 premiere), was Bair's own uncle. And so, now, the family's letter is also preserved musically, in often transparent orchestration notable for the timpani's quietly pervading role, sometimes in heartbeat sync, and with empathetic glockenspiel, string quartet and solo trumpet colour inside the work's unostentatious drama. My one unfulfilled wish was for the letter text to be in the concert brochure, which valuably included the poems Elgar had set. We'd been told the subject but depended on the singer for the words written. Let this be a prerequisite in the Bair work's future performances. But so much enlightenment to take away from this rich concert's content – and sound. In this faithful acoustic, the WSO's Elgarian sea climaxes with gong and bass drum evoking near-fathomless depth, plus the bells in the Alwyn and Bair, will for many strike memorably awesome.