

Maidstone Symphony Orchestra
Brian Wright (Conductor)
Benjamin Baker (Violin)

Review by Susan Elkin – susanelkin.co.uk

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An all English programme with three works likely to be unfamiliar to most of the audience is a brave undertaking, but on the whole Brian Wright and the MSO carried it off with their usual aplomb.

At the heart of the evening was *Lark Ascending*, regularly voted by the British public its favourite piece of classical music. Violinist Baker presented Ralph Vaughan Williams's evocative masterpiece as a substantial post-interval encore and he played it – his hands small and his fingers fascinatingly neat – with immaculate musical control. Yes, he, and we, really did soar and hover with the eponymous bird.

Baker's pre-interval work was Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's G minor violin concerto – an unusual key for a violin concerto – and it was a warmly business-like performance starting with the grandiloquence of the opening movement with its flamboyant melodies. I admired the gentle lyricism in the *andante*. It's very hard to achieve but Baker gave us a passionate song-like quality carefully supported by Wright delivering the instrumental detail in the muted accompaniment. The legato violin over the short wind notes in third movement was another rather lovely moment.

The concert had begun with Holst's ballet music for *The Perfect Fool* and ended with Elgar's *Falstaff* so theatrical reference was, in effect, a theme.

The Holst piece, which came soon after *The Planets*, enjoys similar quirky orchestration so there was plenty of opportunity for MSO players to show just how good they are from the trombone opening, to the bassoons grunting at the very bottom of their register. In the second dance, *The Spirits of Water*, the harp and flute moment was attractively balanced.

Elgar's *Falstaff* is a musical exploration of the character of Shakespeare's "Fat Jack" as he appears in the two *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V* in which he dies off stage. It's a colourful episodic piece which required the return of full forces, including five percussionists. Those of us who know the plays well – from the bawdy comedy to the cruel trickery and ultimately to the devastating rejection – can appreciate Elgar's imaginative contrasts including whispering strings and wind interjection. It was all pretty accurately played here, with some delightful bassoon work although it's a very challenging piece – Elgar is never straightforward – and there was a feeling in places that the strings were working at the far edge of their ability. Nonetheless it was quite an achievement for a community orchestra – another feather in MSO's cap.

