

**MILTON KEYNES CITY  
ORCHESTRA/CITY OF  
LONDON CHOIR/HILARY  
DAVAN WETTON**

Dorchester Abbey ★★★★★

It would be difficult to find a more appropriate setting for this concert (which was part of the inaugural English Music Festival) than the glorious Dorchester Abbey in the quintessentially English village of Dorchester-on-Thames.

Here was a wide range of English music – some of it well known, some of it neglected. In the former category were the strings of the Milton Keynes City Orchestra, under the precise, capable and supportive direction of Hilary Davan Wetton, which produced a lively account of Britten's youthful *Simple Symphony*. The pizzicato movement was taken at a brisk tempo and the finale lived up to its frolicsome

title in what was a memorably warm performance.

The second half opened with Samuel Wesley's Symphony in E Flat, one of the lesser-known works. The symphony is charming and elegant (if perhaps a little short of sparkle and originality), and well worth hearing in sympathetic hands such as these.

The orchestra was joined by the excellent City of London Choir for the two works that framed the concert. The first of these was Holst's rarely performed *Two Psalms* for chorus, string orchestra and organ. These settings of Psalm 86 and Psalm 148 were delightful.

The first is full of rhythmic and harmonic interest, with a *senza misura* interjection by the tenor soloist (Lionel Steuart Fotheringham), and ending in a blaze of colour provided by the organ, chorus and orchestra. The second of them is of simpler construction, but no less beautiful.



**Precise: Hilary Davan Wetton**

Jeremy Irons provided a well-paced and nuanced narration for Vaughan Williams's rarely performed *An Oxford Elegy*, which brought the concert

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to a wonderful climax. First performed in 1952, it is based on two poems by Matthew Arnold, "The Scholar Gypsy" and "Thyrsis". The orchestra, chorus and narrator all caught the melancholic mood of the piece, which, for all its sadness and resignation, ends on a note of hope and defiance. This work of aching beauty should be performed more often.

Very occasional imperfections in ensemble aside, the concert was beautifully performed. The choir and the orchestra excelled under the adroit direction of Davan Wetton. Together, they were able to demonstrate what great English musical treasures have been allowed to gather dust, and to show what a great shame it is that they have been allowed to do so.

**Frank Lennon**  
Lecturer  
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