

Birmingham Post, 9th December 2011
by Christopher Morley

THE ORCHESTRA OF ST JOHN
St John's Church, Bromsgrove

This was the debut concert of a brand-new orchestra formed with the laudable aim of allowing student musicians the opportunity to learn from playing alongside seasoned professionals, and it deserves to do well.

But what's in a name? Throughout the programme the ensemble is named as in the above header, but proudly at the top of the front cover is the most confusing of logos, emblazoning "orchestrajohn". If you look more closely you can see tiny "the" and "of", ill-fitted, apart from the words they should precede - but where is the St? Well, it is indeed there, but you need to be a member of MENSA to work it out.

Well-meant advice: if you change the order of the printed programme, do tell the punters; an entire first half in the key of G minor becomes somewhat monochrome; please give the harpsichord player the courtesy of being named; the name of one of the most important players was misspelt, and though we knew who he was, we needed to know that he, Diego Vassallo shared an empathetic partnership with Charlotte Moseley in Corelli's Christmas Concerto.

At last to the music. This is a neat, tidy and fearless little orchestra, reliable in intonation, and with a strong bass-line presence from so few players which was not just due to this excellent acoustic.

More baroque music came with Handel's G minor Organ Concerto, Paul Charman bringing appropriate registrations and crisp delivery to the solo part, the orchestra accompanying alertly, and Charman giving a spirited rendition of Buxtehude's rather jokey Prelude, Fugue and Chaconne (but what a horribly jarring intrusion from the mightiest pipes at the end).

Richard Jenkinson was the conductor, hyper-enthusiastic, but with an excess of body-language which seemed to emulate what we have read of Beethoven, crouching to the ground, then leaping up to the heavens, and with so much more besides, almost semaphoring the score as he certainly secured expressive dynamics. In baroque music this was inappropriate, as it was in Tchaikovsky's neo-classical Serenade for Strings, which the players delivered with sensitivity and gossamer clarity.

Elgar's Introduction and Allegro was bravely done, the youthful Amicus Quartet the soloists, their contribution movingly heartfelt (despite one bumpy moment), Jenkinson securing seamless tempo changes, and making one emphatic point with a thumping cricketing-drive.