The Kingdom, reviewed by Nigel Simeone

Royal Festival Hall, 29 January 2026

Walking into the Royal Festival Hall, the audience was greeted by the spectacular sight of well over two hundred singers, from the Crouch End Festival Chorus and the Hertfordshire Chorus, arrayed across the back of the stage. That was a fine visual portent of the rich musical rewards to come. This *Kingdom* always promised to be a special occasion: last year's recording for Signum Classics by the Crouch End Festival Chorus and the London Mozart Players conducted by David Temple was one of the most memorable releases of 2025, and this concert was an opportunity to hear Temple conduct the work live, with the two choirs he has directed for decades, and four soloists – soprano Francesca Chiejina, mezzo Dame Sarah Connolly, tenor Benjamin Hulett and bass-baritone Ashley Riches – who were also reunited from the recording.



David Temple

From the start of the Prelude, David Temple's supremely assured pacing, his flexible phrasing, and his attention to instrumental detail produced a reading of quiet nobility, and a sweeping sense of musical trajectory that made for compelling listening: he seemed to conceive the entire work as a whole, an impression that was strengthened by performing it without an interval. From the first entry ('Seek first the Kingdom of God') the choral singing was exceptional: not only was there a magnificent body of tone, but also exemplary diction, clear rhythmic articulation and, as the performance progressed, a marvellous range of vocal colour. Here were two choirs who clearly knew the work exceptionally well, and they did Elgar proud. For that, David Temple must take much of the credit: his passionate belief in *The Kingdom* translated into an outstanding interpretation which made an utterly compelling case for considering it to be Elgar's supreme choral work.

I reflected after the concert that although I never heard Alan Kirby conduct Elgar with the Croydon Philharmonic Choir (I was too young – he died in 1959), this performance put me in mind of reports of that legendary figure. Sir Adrian Boult wrote in Kirby's obituary for the *Musical Times* that 'To hear him direct *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom* was to gain an insight into those works and to feel a spiritual experience which comes only too rarely in the concert hall. Their message, one felt, was thoroughly understood by every member of the choir, so often and so completely had their magnetic conductor studied the works with them, and the resulting performances were not just concerts of rare beauty but acts of worship of deep significance.'

I am happy to echo Sir Adrian's words to describe David Temple's conducting of *The Kingdom* at the Festival Hall. It's no surprise to discover that Temple sang under Boult in the 1970s, and they both share the same view of *The Kingdom* as Elgar at his greatest. What Boult in his surviving 1957 live performance at the RFH (coincidentally with Kirby's Croydon Philharmonic Choir) and Temple (with his Crouch End and Hertfordshire choirs) both achieved was an intensity of expression and a way of capturing all the work's meditative fervour without ever allowing things to drag.

The four soloists were outstanding: not only through the quality of their singing but also the deep sincerity with which they delivered the music. Francesca Chiejina (Mary) was lustrous in 'The sun goeth down', and her duet with Sarah Connolly (Mary Magdalene) in Part II ('The singers are before the altar') combined hushed beauty with burning conviction. The male soloists were no less impressive. Benjamin Hulett (John) has a clear, bright voice that rang out with unforced eloquence, while Ashley Riches (Peter) not only sang with calm nobility, but with an unusually fine sense of line. His 'In the Name of Jesus Christ' at the end of Part III was a moment of heart-stopping eloquence and unforced authority – and the response of the choirs in this majestic passage was simply glorious.

Anybody who doesn't yet have Temple's recording (very warmly reviewed by Andrew Neill in last August's *Journal*) should not hesitate: this is one of those exceptional interpretations where a conductor not only has an extraordinary depth of understanding for a work he loves but conveys those interpretative insights quite

brilliantly to his performers. My only minor reservation at the Festival Hall concert concerned the orchestra: a few more string players – particularly lower strings – and a second harp (called for by Elgar) would have given the sound a greater depth of tone, but in general the London Orchestra da Camera acquitted itself well, particularly the wind, brass and timpani.



This was a *Kingdom* that will stay long in the memory. I'm sure I wasn't the only member of the audience to have been moved to tears in several places, and the performance throughout had a concentration and conviction that was utterly engrossing.