Midlands Classical Music Making

Christopher Morley's essential guide - with contributions from his team of specialist reviewers

- July 29, 2026

ELGAR, POULENC AND JANACEK

Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester Cathedral ****

On Monday evening Adrian Partington, Director of this year's Gloucester Festival on the Three Choirs circuit, managed something a one-time Prime Minister ducked out of attempting. He held the pause on the first beat of the second bar of Elgar's Cockaigne Overture perfectly, before releasing the Philharmonia Orchestra strings into a scurry of detail.

This proved a reading both bustling and tender, revealing all the pageantry and poignancy the composer so loved in London Town. Of course allowances had to be made for the sounds of the various sections of the cramped-up orchestra bouncing off various parts of the cathedral's architecture (how wonderful to feel the rumblings of the organ under one's feet at the very end), but these were of no matter.

More serious was the well-intentioned but inept CCTV coverage, homing in on subsidiary instruments when others had the major line, occasionally showing us nothing (such as a totally static organ pedal-board in a subsequent offering), and sadly lacking in direction. I have seen much sharper CCTV than this, for example in Lichfield Cathedral many years ago. May I suggest future employment of an intern music student, cueing in cameras while following the score?

Katelyn Emerson was soloist in the atmospheric Poulenc Organ Concerto, its Gothic strains admirably suited to this imposing setting. Her registrations on this magnificent newly-installed instrument were resourceful and telling, her pedalling was deft and secure, her ensemble with the orchestra below was perfect, and this was an account of this cherishable work I will long remember. When she emerged from the rood-screen we gasped at this tiny figure who had evoked such power (the only comparison I can recall is Reginald Goodall conducting Wagner). More recognition could have been afforded to the authoritative timpanist Oliver Taylor

What followed was not so successful. Janacek's Glagolitic Mass might be spectacular and garish, but has its flaws. The composer seems to favour the orchestra more than the chorus, and in this acoustic all the efforts of the Festival Chorus – superbly phrasing as one, well-drilled Czech pronunciation cancelled out into a mush, a totally committed response – were diminished. Similarly, Janacek's solo vocal lines (soprano Rachel Nicholls and tenor Gwyn Hughes Jones, both given hectic tessituras, contralto Hilary Summers and bass Ashley Riches with much less to do) sit awkwardly on proceedings.

The orchestra played magnificently, Katelyn Emerson provided two stunning organ interjections, but that was the trouble. Janacek's Agnus Dei has the most beautiful music, very much late Puccini, and ends so serenely, But then a strident organ cadenza, followed by a fanfaring orchestra, shatters all the peace, and made me, usually a great fan, hate Janacek.

Elgar's Music Makers, similar in length, and with Hilary Summers available as alto soloist, would have provided a far more satisfactory second half.

Christopher Morley

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- *April 28, 2023*

A triumphant night for the CBSO's 'King Kazuki' CBSO at Symphony Hall ★★★★★ I doubt if the forthcoming coronation of King Charles III will be greeted with such spontaneous joy or the wholehearted embrace which greeted Kazuki Yamada as he was crowned as the CBSO's new Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor. The packed S ⋯

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Jacquie Lawson e-card music

- *April 13, 2020*

THE MUSIC BEHIND THE E-CARDS MIKE HUGHES-CHAMBERLAIN AND JACQUIE LAWSON E-CARDS by Christopher Morley It's always a joy when an e-greetings card plops into your inbox, not least at festive times of the year. It's easy to understand why the sending of these cyber-messages has become so popular, given the huge c ⋯

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- *June 14, 2026*

BIRMINGHAM PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Birmingham Town Hall ***** In Birmingham, Mahler's Second Symphony, the "Resurrection" has become something of a "Farewell" Symphony. Sir Simon Rattle signed off his 18-year principal conductorship of the CBSO with it in ⋯

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