

Monumental ninth symphony demands heroic determination

NEWBURY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA AND NEWBURY CHORAL SOCIETY, at St. Nicolas' Church, on Saturday, December 2

AT THE end of Beethoven's 'Ninth Symphony' the audience applauded with hands raised above heads, cried "Bravo!" and stamped their feet. And yet, sadly, the quality of music-making was significantly below the standard I am accustomed to hearing from these forces.

There was a fair smattering of individual errors but the main problem was a lack of focus, particularly in quieter passages, that led to a loss of the momentum crucial to the first two movements, and a muddying of the extended phrasing essential to the third. By the fourth movement the orchestra was sounding tired and I had lost interest. I had hoped that the arrival of the chorus and soloists would lift things, but they too seemed to have caught the mood.

All this was the more extraordinary because, despite a shaky first few bars and the occasional forgivable fluff, Vaughan Williams' 'Benedicite' in the first half was played with energy and clarity, a credit to all. Particularly impressive was the joyous first section with its pagan rhythms recalling the dance in Holst's 'Hymn of Jesus'.

So why did the Beethoven get the better

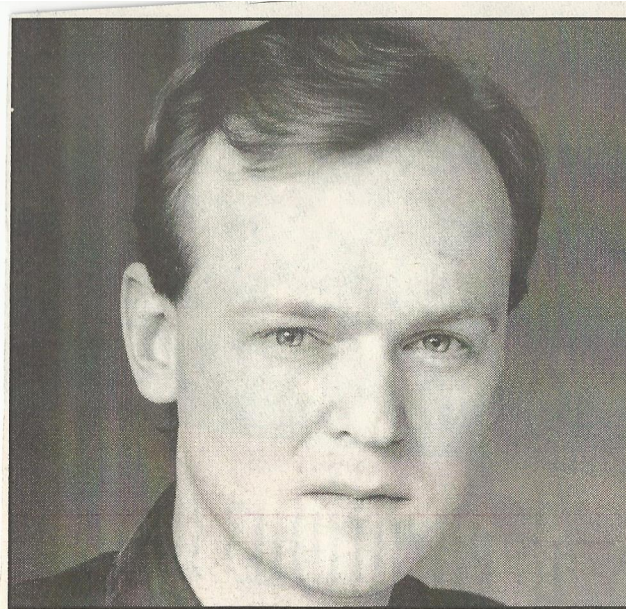
reception, not merely generous but rapturously enthusiastic?

I conclude that appreciation was being shown of the musicians playing the game, regardless of whether they won or lost.

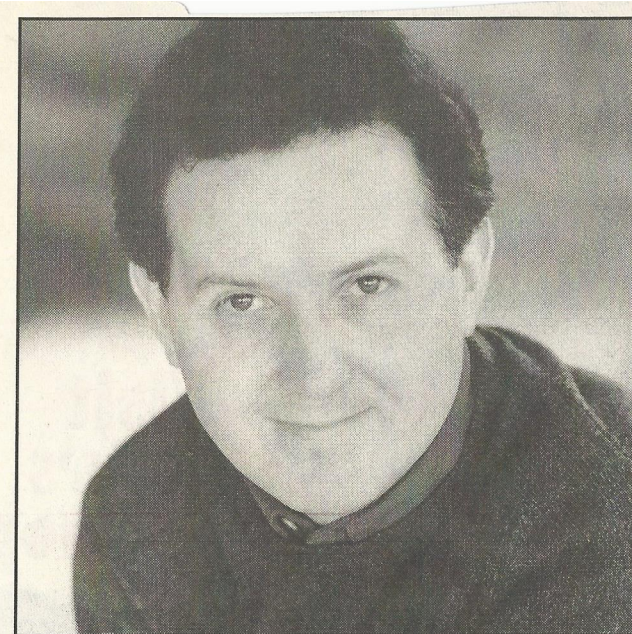
The work is monumental in many ways, not just in terms of its musical stature. It makes huge demands, of which stamina is one. This immediately makes it more difficult for amateurs, who have to cope with day jobs and then find additional resources on stage: afternoon rehearsal, evening performance. It is also technically difficult, much more so than is normal for music of the period. It was brave to take it on.

Hence the applause. They got through it, received deserved admiration for their heroic determination, and I do not begrudge it one bit. What else can one say but "well done" when a member of the orchestra, chatting afterwards, declares it to be the most difficult and draining piece he has ever played and suggests that a week off work will be necessary to recover?

ROBERT BAKER-GLENN



Bass soloist Martin Robson and mezzo soprano Louise Mott sang at St. Nicolas' Church on Saturday



Tenor Huw Rhys-Evans and soprano Janet Coxwell

