

Thirteen Strings open season with tasteful, haunting performance



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Conductor Kevin Mallon and Thirteen Strings at the orchestra's 2010 fundraising concert.
BILL BLACKSTONE / OTTAWA CITIZEN

Thirteen Strings
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, 82 Kent St.
Reviewed Friday, November 14

Although it was published in 1896, A.E. Housman's poetry cycle *A Shropshire Lad* became one of the touchstone literary works for Britain during and after the First World War. Housman's hymn to an idealized, Eden-like English countryside, slashed through with dark reflections on death and lost youth, proved particularly irresistible to an entire shell-shocked generation of British composers, including Vaughan Williams, George Butterworth, and John Ireland, who set Housman's words to memorable song.

For the opening concert of Thirteen Strings' new season, director Kevin Mallon picked several of these settings — originally composed for tenor and piano — and arranged them for strings. Other orchestral works connected to the Great War rounded out this Remembrance Day-themed program.

The soloist was young British Columbia tenor Isaiah Bell, whose cool, bright tenor is ideal for this repertoire. Bell delivered a tastefully restrained performance; he has an almost courtly reserve and refined, sensitive sense of phrasing that lets the powerful poetry speak for itself. A highlight was Butterworth's *Is my team ploughing*, a haunting dialogue between the dead and the living. Bell

created spooky, vivid contrast between the ghostly head voice of the dead man and the full-throated singing of his surviving friend.

The most appealing aspect of Bell's still-developing voice is the velvety, backlit quality of his lower and middle register. Higher up, his naturally fast vibrato tightens up, producing a metallic tinge. The ringing heights of Vaughan Williams' *On Wenlock Edge* were not quite fully in his grasp, although the interpretation was still sympathetic (reading the poems out loud before each song disrupted the flow of this lovely cycle, however.)

Mallon's arrangements worked for the most part, although he and Bell did not always seem to be on the same page with tempo. In the first half of the concert, Mallon alternated the songs with the movements from Vaughan Williams' *Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus*. It's a set of variations for harp and strings built on a stirring English folk tune. The panting urgency of the second variation was especially effective, and harpist Michelle Gott and cellist Julian Armour were deep in an intimate conversation throughout.

The *Nimrod* movement from Elgar's *Enigma Variations* has become almost obligatory in these memorial-type concerts, but this reading was far from cliché. The transparency inherent in a smaller ensemble illuminated the rich inner harmonies like fine gold thread.