

Sunday 17th March 2013

Review of the concert by Philip Worth:

Some masterworks of music which have attained celebrity and are now firmly established in the repertoire got off to a slow start. One thinks of both Brahms and Tchaikovsky's piano concertos which, on their first public performances were savaged by the critics and thereafter took a long time to win public appreciation. Not so Grieg; his piano concerto was a hit from Day One. Composed and first performed in Denmark it was then acclaimed (vociferously!) by the giant Franz Liszt who played it right through from the composer's own manuscript. Grieg, apparently, was overwhelmed, laughing hysterically all the way back to his digs – perhaps an unsurprising reaction from a 25-year-old relatively unknown composer.

This masterwork has many attributes but one, I believe is very special, namely its power to inspire the performance of any soloist. **The timpani roll in the first bar leading to a dramatic piano flourish is bound to fire up a player and our soloist. Rachel Fryer made it do just that. Her interpretation was indeed impressive; this work ranges in mood from the dramatic to the lyrical and challenges the pianist to respond sensitively to its various nuances. Rachel's artistic control never flagged giving us a performance to stay in the memory.**

If ever there was a concert programme which promised relief at the end of a long and miserable winter this was it. Tom Loten knows how to pull the stops out on these occasions; all the ingredients were there for a heady musical cocktail – bravura patriotism, hellish dancing, romance, nostalgia, scenic beauty – all blending on the DSO canvas to make us proof against the wettest rain and the coldest winds. Bravo our gallant musicians – who needs single malt?

Whose pulse would not race on hearing the magnificent, fiery turbulence of Finlandia by Sibelius, with its proud, majestic hymn tune, proof, for the Finns in 1901 against the bullying might of Tsarist Russia? But if the blood in our veins was made to throb by Finland it was Russia which chilled it. Night on the Bare Mountain by Mussorgsky seems to reach into the darkest recesses of the soul where evil spirits dance at the behest of their overlord Satan. But how easy it is for the fragile self-belief of young composers to be put at the hazard! The Bare Mountain was brutally slated by Balakirev to whom it had been trustingly submitted for his opinion. Mussorgsky was in shock and did not go near the piece for another ten years. In fact it was not until five years after his death that it achieved its final orchestral version thanks entirely to the skills and generously supportive work of Rimsky Korsakov. Since then it has, of course become a universally popular concert piece and has even been subjected to cartoon illustration in Walt Disney's Fantasia.

In gentler mood we had two movements from Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings (Elegy and Waltz). This piece is vintage Tchaikovsky in at least two ways. Firstly, it owes its musical inspiration to his great idol Mozart, and also, most certainly, its classical form, with four movements each with contrasting tempi. In his correspondence the composer compared it with the 1812 overture which he described as 'showy, noisy and with no artistic merit' (personally I love it!). Secondly, in the Serenade Tchaikovsky was true to his artistic creed, which was that music should be the means of expressing human emotion. In his case few would argue with that – the inspired melodic outpouring is irresistible. This was one of his own favourite compositions which he was impatient to hear performed.

To round off this delightful concert we enjoyed the dreamy lyricism of Dvorak's Slavonic Dances. These pieces were largely brought to public attention by Brahms, who was on the committee awarding the Austrian State Musical Scholarship. The German master was immediately impressed by the melodic genius of the Slavonic Dances and referred them to his own publisher Simrock who took them up with enthusiasm. It is good to think that to Brahms we owe not only his own great music but the flowering of the unique voice from Bohemia.