Dacorum Symphony Orchestra

January 16th 2016

Centenary Hall Berkhamsted

This concert was an example of the daring and imaginative programming that Tom Loten has frequently displayed in the past. To go from the classical (Mozart, Beethoven) to ‘modern’ English (Vaughan Williams) with nothing in between could be regarded as a risk strategy – but it worked wonderfully well thanks to the artistic cohesion and focus of the orchestra under the maestro’s baton.

In the overture to his opera *Don Giovanni* Mozart strikes just the right note for what is to follow – a blend of comedy, melodrama and supernatural elements. After some menacing introductory bars the strings scuttle along happily telling us not to take things too seriously; however, this is punctuated at intervals by angry short chords to keep us on the straight and narrow. Don Giovanni, an unscrupulous seducer and all round baddy is, of course, the villain of the peace but it could be that, as with the Prague audience of 1788, we have mixed feelings; if we’re honest are we not just a wee bit fascinated by ‘bad lots’ but glad all the same that they eventually get their cum-uppence?

The soloist at the 1803 premiere of Beethoven’s *piano concerto no.4 in G* was none other than the composer himself. It was, in fact, to be his last public performance as a piano soloist because already, (he was only 33) he was aware of the early symptoms of increasing deafness and he shrank from exposing himself as anything less than the perfectionist he was. The two hundred years which have elapsed since the premiere have seen this splendid work performed by countless superb pianists and analysed by equally countless music critics; and therefore great was our pleasure – players and audience alike – to welcome Vic McLean as our soloist on this occasion. Viv has already fashioned a brilliant career as a virtuoso pianist, in constant demand by many distinguished venues, orchestras and conductors, both in the UK and abroad. That said he has for long cherished a special bond with the DSO and its director Tom Loten; and now, as we might expect, his reading of the concerto was impeccable and instinct with the intense feeling of which the Great Master would have approved. DSO joyously supported Viv with warmth throughout.

After the interval the music passed from German classical/romantic to English and ‘modern’. This would have suited composer Vaughan Williams who was concerned, throughout his career, to shake off the Teutonic influence of the 19th century and to sound a new, individual and English note; he succeeded with his Fifth Symphony. This beautiful and mystical work was composed and premiered in 1943 when Vaughan Williams was over 70 and the 2nd World War was at its furious height. The music has the quality of a dream, always distant, always at peace and somehow breathing the ancient soul of England from its very heart. Two of VW’s tone poems -  *in the Fen Country* and *A Norfolk Rhapsody* exude much the same atmosphere, so perhaps we could regard the 5th Symphony as more a tone poem itself than a symphony? And one further sentiment, if I may (with apologies for mixing metaphors!); the lovely finale suggests a glorious sunset, with the sun sinking to rest amid reds and golds after spreading its healing warmth during a fine Summer’s day.

And DSO performed this challenging work with sustained professionalism and sensitivity from beginning to end.

*Footnote: Vaughan Williams always refuted suggestions that he wrote ‘programme’ music.*

*he once protested “it never seems to occur to people that a man might just want*

*to write a piece of music!’ Point taken, but I’m sure that this Master would*

*approve of the ‘programmes’ that his haunting melodies inspire in music lovers*

*everywhere.*