

HIGHSPOT IN EASTBOURNE'S CULTURAL LIFE

ROBIN GREGORY catches two concertos with the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra and two winning soloists

For more than thirty years, Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra has provided the town with a wide range of music, and by offering an annual young soloist competition has encouraged blossoming talent. On Saturday 9 June this year's joint winners performed their chosen concertos in the beautiful St Saviour's Church, one of the finest creations of architect Street. The orchestra was, as usual, under the secure baton of Graham Jones, and was led by Lisa Wigmore. As a prelude to the main events, they played Wagner's monumental overture to *The Mastersingers*. This was an appropriate choice since the entire opera (five hours or so) leads up to a musical competition. Its complex textures, which quote themes from what is to come, were handled well by the unusually large orchestra. Strings and brass were clearly in fine form.

The first soloist was joint-winner Katy Smith, who played Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto*. Fifty or so years ago this work was performed with great frequency, but now it seems to appear less often. With this change in popularity, styles of interpretation have altered. Whereas Campoli was admired for his subtle accuracy, now each new recording seems to be faster than the last. Katy favoured this trend and set off at a cracking pace. She was nonetheless able to bring out some of the solo part's nuances, clearly differentiating (say) a melody on her lowest string from the decoration woven round it on the others. By following the composer's intentions and playing all three movements without a break she made clear the overall shape of the work; and along the way we had a sweetly singing slow movement and a headily racing finale. Little wonder the applause was instant, loud and prolonged.

After the interval Naufal Mukumi played Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Concerto*. He was born in Uzbekistan in 1991, the very year that this land-locked country of some 28,000,000 people became independent. (It had been one of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.) His hometown, Tashkent, is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful in that region, and his success is already known there, to the extent that the Uzbeki Cultural Attaché was at the concert and was introduced to Eastbourne's Mayor. Naufal's performance was superb. An unusual feature installed in the Church was the large screen that presented a perfect picture of his hands as he went through each challenge presented by this wonderful concerto. Rachmaninov fifty years ago was often thought of as a fine pianist though a very limited composer; but his compositions are now (rightly) seen as romantic masterpieces of the highest order. They are imitated in film-scores ("Warsaw Concerto") and turned into popular songs ("Full Moon and Empty Arms"). The work so brilliantly played by Naufal helped to bring on the tears in that railway-waiting-room weepie "Brief Encounter". Behind all the emotion, however, is a beautifully-constructed piece for piano and orchestra. We had a fine interpretation of all three movements. Uzbekistan can be proud of Naufal, as Peterborough can be proud of Katy. And Eastbourne should be proud of the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra.