

Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra swings and thunders
Robin Gregory reports on a great evening out

For their concert at St Saviour's on 18 October the ESO presented a perfect programme to create a memorable evening. Conductor and musical director Graham Jones had selected two French masterpieces (one large in every sense; one small and delicate) which sat extremely comfortably between a sparkling overture by a European who died before his fortieth birthday, and a showpiece by an American genius... who died before *his* fortieth birthday.

I have never seen Nicolai's 'Merry Wives of Windsor', and a well-judged performance of the overture once again made me live in hopes. The pianissimo of the opening strings (always difficult before everyone has warmed up) was faultlessly in tune (congratulations to leader Lisa Wigmore), and the changing rhythms and charming melodies were all brought out. Nicolai, who apparently never lived to see his opera, would have been delighted.

David Force (perfect name for an organist, to be set alongside E Power Biggs, surely) disappeared to the distant organ console; Ke Ma settled herself at the concert grand; Graham raised his baton; and we were into Saint-Saëns's 'Organ Symphony'. Conventional wisdom tells us that we are dealing with a minor composer, but not in my book. I'm a fan! The work is endlessly tuneful, and gives ample opportunity to bask in the lush scoring, the subtle rhythms and the Gallic charm. Some recordings are known to capture the orchestral part first, and then dub in the organ of some cathedral; but there's an added excitement at a good all-in-one performance. And we certainly got that.

After the interval, Fauré's Pavane reassured us that every section of the orchestra was having a good evening; and then Ke Ma (striking now in a scarlet dress) sat as the clarinet slurred perfectly up to the opening theme of Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue'. When the composer wrote this music for Paul Whiteman's orchestra he was not yet able to orchestrate, so the job fell to Ferde Grofé (of the 'Grand Canyon Suite'). The popularity of the work has meant that many full symphony orchestras now play it, whereas it needs smaller forces. There were, inevitably, moments in Graham's performance when, for all his skill, the ESO overpowered even Ke Ma's tremendous rendition; but, having said that, nothing could mask either the brilliance of her playing or the ability of this orchestra to catch the idiom. When the 'big tune' finally appeared and was followed by the pianist's heady response, we were reminded that Gershwin's and Rachmaninoff's rhapsodies were near contemporaries. The audience response said it all; and I clapped as hard as any of them.