

Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra finishes 36th season in great form

Review by Robin Gregory

St Saviour's Church on 30 October was the perfect venue for what was, perhaps, the ESO's best performance yet. Musical director Graham Jones had planned a taxing but entertaining programme, had picked four of the orchestra's finest musicians as soloists in one of the works to be played, and had brought to Eastbourne possibly the finest young horn player in Europe.

The Academic Festival Overture which opened the concert finds Brahms in one of his rare smiling moods. The composer was receiving an honorary degree from Breslau University in 1879, and repaid that institution with a colourful, brightly-scored collection of student song-tunes. Graham's players gave this enchanting work all the zip and sparkle it demands, each melody seeming to rise fresh-minted from the orchestral depths. A great start !

The main work in the first half was a Sinfonia Concertante for Wind Instruments which might (or might not) be by Mozart. Scholars cannot make up their minds whether this is a work of the Master, even in part. I incline to membership of the 'no' group, and found, when speaking to some fine musicians in the audience, that roughly half shared my view. But whatever the truth of the matter, the Sinfonia provides a fine opportunity for four soloists to shine. It speaks wonders for the ESO that all four could be found within the orchestra's own ranks, and shine they certainly did. Barbara Ashby (oboe) phrased beautifully, bringing out the instrument's ability to sing with a human voice. Margaret Phillips (clarinet) soared aloft or plunged below, judging when to lead, when to follow. Hilary Ougham (bassoon) reminded us that her instrument is capable of both serious and light-hearted utterance. Zoe Hurlock showed the horn to be capable of whispers as well as firm statements. Without doubt, these four ladies of the orchestra demonstrated the in-depth ability of the ESO which now characterises Graham's creation.

After the interval we heard a stunning example of Russian music from the mid-twentieth century. The Horn Concerto by Reinhold Glière is (despite his mix of German and French names) firmly in the romantic vein of Tchaikovsky. It is full of tunes, and exploits the rich orchestral sound of a sizeable orchestra. Huge demands are made on the horn soloist who must be able to play with the facility of a fine violinist. Ben Goldscheider was, this year, a finalist in the ESO's annual young soloist competition. He also won the brass category final in the BBC Young Musician, and is already gaining an international reputation. His performance here won a standing ovation. In addition, every one of the three movements brought out the best from the ESO. The last movement, surprisingly, opens with the soloist silent, and the brass of the orchestra at full stretch. Ben had, by then, so inspired the ESO's musicians that they were really on tip-top form. Add to that a body of strings led by Lisa Wigmore which were so much more than simply 'in tune', and the town can be justifiably proud of its orchestra's continued progress.

Join the audience for the 2017 young soloist competition on 7 and 8 January (first round), and 29 January (final). And for Brahms' Requiem on 19 March. More details from www.eso.org.uk