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Brahmsian Fireworks at the Ilkley Concert Club

FRANÇOIS-FRÉDÉRIC GUY at the King's Hall

11th October 2017

Club members gave a tumultuous welcome to the French pianist, François-Frédéric Guy, when he opened the 72nd season at the Kings Hall last Wednesday with a programme of sonatas by Beethoven and Brahms.

The first half was devoted to the two most well-known of Beethoven's sonatas – the 'Moonlight' and the 'Pathétique'. It is hard to play these famous pieces well but here we heard performances that were completely individual, undoubtedly virtuosic and clearly rooted in a deeply-felt relationship with the score and the instrument. So absorbed was Guy with recreating Beethoven's music that he looked almost dazed when torn away from the piano to acknowledge the applause.

I felt sometimes that the tempi chosen were too fast to allow the music to be heard clearly: in the last movement of the 'Moonlight' I found the running semiquavers too rushed. For me there was also not enough singing tone in the *Adagio cantabile* of the 'Pathétique'. I prefer a more classical approach to these sonatas but there is a good argument for trying to recreate the 'shock of the new' which the first listeners would have experienced in Beethoven by a wilder, more romantic pianism.

However, all such doubts were blown away by the performance of Brahms' F minor Piano Sonata in the second half! This is a work in which the 20 year-old Brahms was laying claim to the mantle of Beethoven, a work with almost too many musical ideas for its own good. The outer movements were given all the fire they needed, their disparate elements forged into a coherent whole. The three central movements displayed wonderful tenderness, with Guy bringing out a wealth of colour, particularly in the pianissimos. It was a complete performance and the audience acknowledged it with lengthy and generous applause, to which Guy responded with equal generosity in his encores – a shimmering account of the Brahms *Intermezzo* Op 119 no. 1 matched with a crisply articulated performance of Beethoven's 'Für Elise'.

Chris Skidmore