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The Philharmonia play Beethoven and Tchaikovsky with Guy and Gardner in Cardiff

Wednesday
13-Feb-13
19:30

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Cardiff
Philharmonia Orchestra

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Beethoven, Fidelio, Op.72: Overture

Beethoven, Piano Concerto no. 3 in C minor, Op.37

Tchaikovsky, Symphony no. 4 in F minor, Op.36

Philharmonia Orchestra

Edward Gardner, Conductor

François-Frédéric Guy, Piano

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There are times when a concert, even those featuring famous and oft-heard works, can be utterly rejuvenating.

Tonight's performance presented a pair of grand minor-key works by two emotional heavyweights of the 19th century. Presented adjacently, Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto and Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony set each other off very well, though it is interesting to note that the catalogues from which they are taken are somewhat different.

Whilst Beethoven was indisputably an emotionally turbulent composer, his Op. 37 concerto sits amid four other piano concerti all in major keys. Tchaikovsky's minor-key Fourth is, by contrast, the rule as opposed to the exception (like Rachmaninov, Tchaikovsky seems to have been a naturally-disposed "minor-key" composer in the melancholy Russian vein).

These meaty main courses, however, were preceded by Beethoven's sunny *Fidelio* overture, reassuring us that we were indeed at a concert, not in mourning. The Philharmonia Orchestra's execution at the outset was bright and crisp and the intermittent punctuating chords were incorporated as part of the overall musical line. Similarly, the Philharmonia maintained a committed impression of forward motion throughout the overture, despite the sudden changes of character. Nevertheless, the slow-moving harmonies were fluid and watery, and the slower-paced, lyrical moments were relaxed and warm, in delightful contrast to the electric staccato figurations from the strings.

After discovering that certain parallels had been drawn between the pianist David Fray and the late Glenn Gould, I was disappointed to find that he had withdrawn from tonight's concert due to ill health. My feelings were quickly dissipated, however, by François-Frédéric Guy, who had stepped in to play Beethoven's Third. As the performance progressed I came to realise that Guy, Edward Gardner and the Philharmonia were, certainly for myself at least, making this more than just yet another fine performance of an excellent concerto. What's more, by the end of the evening, Guy had gone so far as to steal the show for me.



The quiet orchestral opening was full of energy, with the clarity and refinement one might expect from a performance of a Mozart concerto. Gardner and the Philharmonia seemed to deliberately pull their punches in the introductory sforzandi, the reason for which became clear later in the first movement: the performance on offer tonight had far less to do with the opposition of forces and was conceived much more in the spirit of unification and ensemble. The synchronicity between tutti and soloist was effortless and, overall, it was played in a more linear fashion than I have previously encountered. This was most obvious, for example, at the end of the Guy's solos in all three movements, played with such well-judged dynamic balance that the Philharmonia was able to take the musical baton, giving the impression of genuine continuations of larger-scale musical ideas. This was, at times, underpinned by a gesture from Guy, as though offering the music back to the orchestra. What's more, he was not simply absorbed in his own role as the soloist: this was most evident after he had played the very last note of the concerto, when he turned to watch the orchestra, pumping his fists in time with their concluding chords. As an additional point of interest, in keeping with the spirit of an ensemble performance, there was an interaction between the bassoon and oboe at the end of the exposition, made explicit, that I had never before realised was in the score.

Guy's presence was entirely "no fuss" on stage (the occasional hair-toss aside), reminding me of Nelson Freire – economy of movement, but with a highly concentrated and controlled realisation in sound. His opening entry and rapid scales were crisp and articulate, with sparkling trills at the top end of the keyboard towards the end of the first solo. By contrast, he opened the second movement with a rich, warm tone and an intimate, improvisatory pacing that left the audience in a palpable silence.

Following the concerto, the audience cheered when Guy finally returned for an encore: the third movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata*, which he played with an engaging flexibility, fire and inventiveness.

By this point it was apparent that synchronicity was the order of the day, carried through into the Philharmonia's performance of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, from the watertight opening chords through to well-paced and controlled large-scale accelerandi in the second movement. A humorous aggravated exchange between the pizzicato strings and woodwind towards the end of the Scherzo was also brought to the fore. Furthermore, the immediate commencement of the explosive final movement also remained within this vein and came as a delightful surprise. This was a CD-quality performance, with teasing executions of Tchaikovsky's characteristic fleeting woodwind scales in the Andantino and raw, lyrical passages from the strings in the Finale. The rapid brass figures in the fourth movement were also really on the button.

Overall, in spite of the solemn tonality of each of the main works tonight, the concert was far from grave, but was thoroughly uplifting due to the irreproachably high standard of music-making that took place.

Submitted by **Philip May** on 19th February 2013

