

## Words and Music



Jerard and Kremer with the Silesia at the Royal Festival Hall. (Photo by C. Jérol)

Saturday, 25 May 2013

## Ooh Aah Canton

To the Royal Festival Hall for the visit of the newly resplendent Orchestre de la Suisse Romande which for the last fifty years has lived off the reputation of its first fifty years under Ernest Ansermet. Now with the centenary approaching, its French-Swiss friends are determined no longer to dwell on the past, but to create a new outfit worthy of the future. The present conductor Neeme Jaervi has nurtured a fit, youngish ensemble with warmth in its strings, seduction in its woodwind and fire in its brass. Yet its percussionists were first to show as their bowed gongs sent out straight arrow-shafts of tone at the bitter beginning of Arvo Paert's 2010 work *Silhouette: Hommage a Gustave Eiffel*, the composer's countryman conducting with slow-motion gestures. He made Eiffel's steel girders resonate. A sturdy pizzicato waltz followed, the contrast of so modern a work referencing so dated a form enchanting the capacity crowd. Accelerating hotly, the plucking melts into a molten steel legato and climaxes at a sudden silence like the emptiness that follows the completion of a structure, a symphony, novel or tower.

The towering Russian pianist Boris Berezovsky, dubbed 'Grizzly' in the Swiss press, hunched over the Steinway and made no grand flourish at the top-to-bottom opening of Grieg's Piano Concerto. His was a matter-of-fact statement that rescued the work from the burden of its history just as the orchestra itself is trying to do. His lightness brought out the dance in the first movement, his crushed-note chords leaping with gnomic gaiety into a cadenza of intense introspection. The Adagio wafted off the stage like a vapour, the trilling piano afloat on a cloud of soft strings, responding to the horn's golden come-hither. But it is the flute who enchants the fickle pianist in the finale as Berezovsky showed, looking and leaning towards the source of the silver seduction, his fingers finding the excited, enamoured theme for themselves.

The sepulchral bassoon's lovelorn complaint at the start of Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique* wins over the entire orchestra in the first movement as each section varies the motif to so many yearning pleas. A second theme inflates the work like a bouncy castle, plump and inviting, the detail clear in the purity of the clarinet's whisper. The most elegant five-four rhythm in music swirls the burning strings into a revolving dance and Jaervi confronts the cellos with his arms clasped before him like a master demonstrating the devotion of eager performing dogs. With pounding unanimity they played the triumphant third movement like a finale so that the tragedy of the fourth hit home like the unsuspected return of dark clouds. One felt the composer's anguish through the medium, 120 years on, of this superlative band, proudly determined no longer to live in the shadow of its illustrious past, but to honour that background by creating its own reputation. Ansermet's huge repertoire focused on works of his own French culture - Debussy, Ravel and the Parisian Stravinsky. Jaervi does likewise with fellow Estonian Paert, whose profoundly haunting *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* he conducted as a host-flattering encore.

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