

February 2017 – York Barbican Concert Review

Wintry conditions failed to deter a larger-than-usual audience, which was lured by a programme for every palate.

Centred on Sibelius's Fourth Symphony, it also offered pianist Peter Donohoe in Rachmaninov's Paganini Variations, alongside Elgar's Cockaigne and Rimsky-Korsakov's Spanish Capriccio.

The orchestra reacted to Simon Wright's baton with typical disciplined enthusiasm. Elgar's jaunty reaction to London Town were typified by exceptionally crisp trombones (three rather than the optional five), who energised the rest of the brass.

The Fourth is the most austere of Sibelius's seven symphonies, and does not yield its secrets easily. Its first movement in particular can easily lack cogency. But the YGO weathered its wind-scape and delivered a more seamless momentum in the restless Scherzo. A persuasive slow movement rose superbly to its big climax, strings in noble unison, before winding down to a properly mysterious conclusion.

This tension was maintained throughout the stark finale; whirring strings, shrieking trumpet and insistent bells rightly could not bring catharsis.

Inhibition was shed with the Rachmaninov. Donohoe's chameleon touch was uncannily alive to Rachmaninov's mood swings, even if the orchestral backing was not always in tight harness. The second movement's big theme was lush but never sentimental, and Donohoe flitted puckishly through the closing pages, signing off with throw away wit. He is welcome here anytime.

The whole orchestra carried this humour into the Rimsky-Korsakov, whose swirling woodwind solos, in addition to Fiona Love's violin, brought the warmth of truly Iberian panache.

Martin Dryer
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