The new season of Sunday orchestral concerts couldn’t have started better with this top Swiss orchestra and the programme picked up nicely from last season. Busoni’s Lustspiele overture was a rarity and the initial chords were suitably upbeat, with some catchy tunes on the woodwind, and a quirky idea on the basses. It was good to hear this thickly orchestrated piece, more celebratory than comic.

Sol Gabetta is among the finest cellists today and Saint-Saens First Cello Concerto proved wonderfully appropriate in showing her mastery and musicianship. From the imperious opening, the orchestra seemed too loud for the cello yet was quickly resolved allowing the Argentinian’s splendid artistry to be heard. There was some beautiful interplay between the orchestra and soloist with much charm and great delicacy, and the exchange of smiles between Gabetta and the leader Soyoung Yoon in the final movement was delightful. Normally the encore is by the soloist but the whole ensemble and cellist gave us the reflective Faure Elegy. In Beethoven’s Eroica, the exciting opening revealed brilliantly energetic play with uplifting phrasing in the woodwind section (which boasts a top class fluteplayer in Julia Habenschuss).

Bolton’s sculptured hand movements ever so eloquently brought out the tempos and slenderest variations in colour; Bolton of course has great pedigree with his celebrated Beethoven cycle with the Hanover Band recordings. The period sound was invoked by the natural brass instruments and the timpani giving a realistic sense to the music. The orchestra is classical in proportion and is closely located to centre stage giving a more powerful sound in this generous acoustic of the Usher Hall. In the great funeral
march, the oboe of Tilman Zahn was noble and graceful, the scherzo was sprightly with the flutes magnificent and the cogent strings were excellent in the blazes of glory and in the finale, showed great attack. Bolton’s control of ensemble was wonderfully exciting and embellished by masterly rhythmic attention. The reprise of the main theme seemed out of this world, heard on the wind just before the culmination proved a glorious conclusion to this fine concert. I consider this the finest hearing of the Eroica for many years in this hall.

Gregor Tassie – Musical Opinion