Basel SO Deliver Beautiful, Full-Bodied Accounts of Busoni, Saint-Saëns, and Beethoven

I can’t remember ever having come across the Basel Symphony Orchestra before, but based on this concert, I’d be very happy to do so again. The band they brought for their tour to Edinburgh was fairly small – more chamber orchestra than symphony orchestra size – but they used their size to great effect, producing a modern-instrument sound that was clean, precise and exceptionally well blended. The semiquaver runs of Busoni’s Lustspiel Overture were admirably clear and audibly distinctive, but their playing and Ivor Bolton’s direction meant that it was never clinical, and the sense of theatrical lightness was really strong.

That was also the case for a really winning account of Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony, which sounded fairly luxurious by the standards of what we’ve come to expect – no period hairshirts here, despite using natural timps and brass – but the size of the band also meant that it was always clean with every line audible. Bolton brought out the work’s rhythmic innovation, the syncopations bouncing around with great energy, and I loved the bite of the fugato sections in the outer movements, as well as the sense of momentum generated in the finale, culminating in the deeply poetic slow variation that precedes the coda. The funeral march was appropriately sombre, though it was a shame that its major key incident lacked the transcendence one would hope for, and the daringly fast tempo for the Scherzo came off triumphantly, even if the natural horns struggled a bit in the Trio.

Their take on Saint-Saëns’ first cello concerto always put beauty over drama, meaning that some of the work’s drive and vigour fell by the wayside a little, and the lyrical second subject worked much better than the slightly-too-limpid first. That mostly suited Sol Gabetta’s chocolatey cello style, however. The way the cello flowed in and out of the orchestral line during the Menuet-like second section was rather lovely, as was the cello’s minor key cantilena, which here sounded like an operatic aria. My only issue was the way Gabetts sound had a tendency to be swallowed up by the orchestra, which struck me as an unfortunate consequence of not knowing the hall, until their encore (which I didn’t recognise) where the blend sounded just right. That’s a pity, therefore, but it didn’t detract from how impressive and detailed if found the sound overall.

Simon Thompson