Manchester Classical Music

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Review of the Basel Symphony Orchestra at the Bridgewater Hall

The Bridgewater Hall’s international orchestra series opened with a visit from the Basel Symphony Orchestra, with its Blackburn-lad (and clearly proud of it) chief conductor, Ivor Bolton.

They may not be one of those that immediately spring to mind in lists of the world’s top ten orchestras, but the Basel band have a sound of their own, based - at least on this showing - on 40 strings only, with their four double basses standing to play and digging their bows in to give a firm underpinning to a bright tutti. The strings are also capable of making a murmur of a pianissimo and everything in between, so they made the most of the hall’s acoustic properties.

I have the impression that Bolton has schooled them carefully for this tour, and the Lustspiel-Ouverture by Busoni, lightweight though it might be thought in some ways, was a demonstration of neat ensemble, incisive articulation, beautiful woodwind tone and a glittering climax: a very good start.

Saint-Saëns’ Cello concerto was not as pristine in every part orchestrally, but its great virtue was the playing of the soloist, Sol Gabetta. She was last here in 2015, with the Dresden Philharmonic, giving a glorious interpretation of the Elgar concerto, and she did not disappoint this time. Her tone carried through the accompanying textures with ease; she could reduce it to a perfectly controlled whisper, and is adept at letting a quiet phrase hang in the air almost to the point of extinction - in short, a delight to hear. Ivor Bolton contributed to the total effect with imaginative handling of the more cliché-like lurches of style in the writing (with Saint-Saëns you never quite know whether you’ll get Russian misery, Mendelssohnian gossamer or Schumannesque outbursts, but they’re all there).

Her encore piece, Fauré’s Élégie (for which two horns who otherwise enjoyed an easy night were brought on stage), is almost a miniature concerto and endeared her still more to her listeners.

The meat of the evening was Beethoven’s Symphony no. 7. Hardly a novelty, of course, and many of us have probably heard what we consider definitive performances of it in the past. I found Ivor Bolton’s approach overdid the portentousness and heavy drama a bit (the opening sostenuto almost lost the will to live by its end) and though well enunciated didn’t capture all the dance-like qualities that are there to be found.

The scherzo was instead vigorous, loud and proud, with some rasping horn tone to emphasize the point (but more deathly pauses). And the finale was a solid mix, with Bolton determinedly stirring the bowl. A pretty thick raclette, in fact.

But it wowed the crowd, as did their extra bit of Fauré - the Nocturne from his music to Shylock.
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Robert Beale at 01:11

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Robert Beale

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