

A WILDLY INTRIGUING PERFORMANCE

BY JAMES MORLEY

Sinfonieorchester Basel's performance of its «La Mer» program contained many first-time experiences for me; my first time seeing this orchestra play; my first time in the Stadtcasino Basel; even my first time seeing the titular work performed live. Seeing an orchestra for the first time in a new venue is a rather rare occurrence even for most orchestra concert-goers – unless you regularly go to new cities and see the local orchestra in concert, there's few reasons why you would. This is generally cause for plenty of anticipation and obvious questions raised. How is the venue's acoustic? What is the quality of the orchestra? How much are drinks at the bar?

As a new arrival in Basel, my reason for seeing the orchestra for the first time should be pretty clear. The city is famous for its strong music scene, across a variety of disciplines. Unquestionably, the ensemble stood testament to this standard, performing with great intonation, togetherness, and sonority. On the whole, you could say the group plays with «consistency».

Consistency is generally to be expected nowadays, as the standard of orchestral playing is so high across the globe. I often wonder how we can challenge what you might call a «comfortable orchestral experience» – going to a concert with no trepidation about what to expect. But couldn't this trepidation be instead felt as a sense of wonder about what we will hear? What does it serve to go to concerts just because you're familiar enough with the repertoire or composer? More questions I suppose ...

One of the few forms that possible answers might take place in was the presence of violin soloist Pekka Kuusisto. I am honestly not normally a huge fan of seeing a concerto being performed. It's often an experience I find easier to equate to seeing a racehorse run than an artist presenting music. Yet Kuusisto's interpretation was wildly intriguing. This concerto is something of a signature of Kuusisto's, videos on YouTube racking up many more views than most 35-minute classical music videos. But the freshness with which he performed would have you think that he was discovering every note as he played them.

He plays in such a way that it's like seeing into his brain, a glimpse, the fluidity somewhat improvisatory and also revealing— revealing perhaps that he wants us to know something that he can't say. For me, maybe he wants to remind us of his humanity. When things went perhaps not how they *should*, an accepting eyes-up or cheeky smirk would reveal the sense of humour not seen with many concert violin soloists. And finally, with his encore, a sad sea shanty about how without wind or oars a boat shan't sail, we see everything with greater clarity. This actually improvised piece conveyed the expression that one who plays a concerto written by another composer simply can't. I wonder what others in the audience might have thought he was trying to convey ...