

STARS Review: European Union Chamber Orchestra

Posted by Thomas Bray on 2 March 2015

The bowtie of first violinist (and concert master) **Hans-Peter Hofmann**, black with garish yellow spots, seemed like a statement of intent. Yes, it demurely suggested, yes, we are a serious chamber orchestra, all of us esteemed for our technique and artistry...but I'm sure we can find room for a pinch of fun, a soupcon of youthful exuberance. Nothing less could be expected from the **European Union Chamber Orchestra**, a group comprised of some of the continent's finest young musicians, united by a simple love of playing together. There's little room for the po-faced solemnity of some orchestras here.

The opening piece, **Gustav Holst's *St Paul's Suite***, is a fitting beginning. With its lively phrasing, flitting between 6/8 and 9/8 time, the EUCO's energy and enthusiasm memorably evokes the girl's school which inspired the piece. It is, for the most part, catchy, toe-tapping fare, but more reflective passages accented by staccato strings belie a deeper complexity.

Then Hofmann disappears off stage, bringing back with him the wind section as the players prepare to navigate **Joseph Haydn's *Fire Symphony***. This time, it is the startling contrasts in the tempo and volume which stand out, and again, the EUCO's combination of gusto and mastery means that the music is well-served by their interpretation.

The highlight of the evening, however, came after the interval, when they performed **Edvard Grieg's *Two Elegiac Melodies***. It is a change of pace after the flighty phrasing of the former pieces, slower, more considered, but the two pieces are beautiful, and quietly moving. In less assured hands, Grieg's delicate yet defiant melodic lines might be lost amidst the more regretful passages, but the orchestra makes the piece their own with a stand-out performance.

For their final selection, the EUCO welcome renowned pianist **John Lill** for **Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat***. It is a piece designed to showcase a virtuoso talent (Beethoven's own, in fact), and Lill more than meets the task; his head is stock-still while his hands are a frenzy of activity. This final choice is also a fine piece of staging, with the jet-black grand piano taking pride of place, so close to the audience that the front-row must surely have felt imperilled.

This was another assured hit in the **Art Centre's illustrious programme of classical music**. When the EUCO pay a return visit, I would implore you to take the time to see them, not least because their own enjoyment of the music directly translates to the performance. The occasional over-enthusiastic sweep of the bow and barely-perceptible jump to begin proceedings only add to the pleasure of seeing these four pieces performed with such masterful zeal. Especially if you are, like me, a newcomer to the classical oeuvre.