

TRIUMPHANT RETURN FOR ROWAN

Music lovers turned out in force last Saturday for the Autumn Concert by Peebles Orchestra – and what a concert it was! The programme offered an enticing mix of familiar masterpieces and comparative rarities, and there was a special attraction in the form of star violinist, Rowan Bell, a son of Peebles and himself a former member of the orchestra.

The concert opened with one of those rarities, Mendelssohn's overture to his little-performed comic opera 'Son and Stranger', written during the composer's visit to Scotland in 1829. If the opening sounded a little tentative, the performance as a whole successfully captured the charm of the piece, with some lovely dialogues between strings and woodwind and a hushed ending beautifully played by the strings.

Like this reviewer, many in the audience will have accumulated fond memories over the years of watching Rowan Bell develop from gifted child to professional violinist. Having heard his fantastic rendition of the Beethoven concerto in 2009, we were eagerly anticipating his return for this performance of the ever-popular Violin Concerto No. 1 by Bruch, and we were not disappointed. Rowan rose effortlessly to all the challenges of this great showpiece, multiple-stops and all, playing with the utmost tenderness at one point, dominating a large orchestra in full cry the next. The serene slow movement was played with a rapt intensity that held the audience spellbound before the exuberant release of the Hungarian-style finale. Conductor Kenneth Dempster expertly shaped the orchestra's contribution as they successfully stepped up several gears from the charm and grace of Mendelssohn to the full-blooded romanticism of Bruch. Quieter passages were played with sensitivity and lots of lovely detail, whilst *tuttis* blazed impressively and the whole work was brought to an exhilarating close.

After the interval came another rarity, the suite 'Belshazzar's Feast' by Sibelius. The orchestra made a strong case for this piece being heard more often, giving a wonderfully characterful account that captured both the exoticism of the orient and the air of melancholy that underlies much of the work. There were particularly fine contributions from the viola and cello principals in 'Solitude', from the flute, with a heartbreaking solo in the 'Nocturne', and from the oboe and clarinet which brought pathos and menace respectively to 'Khadra's Dance'.

Beethoven's 1st Symphony brought us back to more familiar ground and had the orchestra firing on all cylinders. Speeds were perfectly judged throughout, with a lively opening movement followed by a beautifully relaxed *andante*. The *menuetto* was given a splendidly muscular performance that clearly pointed towards the scherzo found in Beethoven's later symphonies then, after an impressively portentous opening, the finale set off at breakneck speed, with scampering violins leading the way. This was a triumphant end to a highly successful concert, and the loud and prolonged applause at the end was thoroughly deserved by all concerned.

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