

Peebles Orchestra Spring Concert, Saturday May 21 2011

On Saturday 21st May my wife and I set out to the Eastgate to see Peebles Orchestra's Spring Concert, something we do every year whenever possible. We were, of course, hoping for a night of brilliant music-making!

We weren't disappointed. The programme was delightfully varied, spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – from Beethoven through Richard Strauss to Lennox Berkeley. It was also rather well executed.

The evening started with Beethoven's Overture to King Stephen (of Hungary). This was a good piece of programming – the piece was the perfect way to start. It was a wonderful combination of gravitas, gentle wind solo sections and rousing 'tuttis'. Although it was taken at quite a brisk tempo, the orchestra managed it with apparent ease. Perhaps not one of Beethoven's better-known pieces and reportedly not one of his best but we enjoyed it enormously.

This was followed by Lennox Berkeley's Serenade for Strings. Although it's one of his most popular works, I wasn't familiar with it but then I don't really know Berkeley much. I am now very much a fan, at least of this particular work, and can't wait to get a recording of it. It starts in a very sparkling manner and immediately captures one's attention. The second movement contains a heart-rendingly beautiful melody, immediately appealing, which gets an airing by the various string sections. In striking contrast, the third movement is as rhythmically interesting with its jagged motifs as the second is graceful and there is a good deal of interplay between the string groupings. The concluding slow movement is sadly reflective, fading away to an almost imperceptible close. I'm sure this work was not an easy one for the orchestra but they carried it off well and ensured that I'd go looking for more Berkeley.

We were then allowed 'chatting time' while the stage was reorganised for Richard Strauss' Serenade for Wind Instruments. This work was composed by a very young Strauss – still only about 17 when he wrote it – and he himself later regarded it as average. However, posterity has judged it rather more favourably! It's a lovely piece - a single movement written in sonata form which doesn't often overstate itself. Gentle and harmonious it washes over you until it comes to a wonderful gentle finish. Nicely played.

After the interval the orchestra and the audience settled in for a long enjoyable stint with Beethoven's 4th Symphony. What else can you say about Beethoven's symphonies which hasn't already been said a million times? Solid, well tried and tested and straight out of the heart of the classical era, we never tire of them. Perhaps not quite so well known as some of the others, the Fourth nevertheless captures the imagination and I felt carried along on the flow of the work with the very capable Robert Dick in the driving seat. Tempos were again not at the sluggish end and must have tested the abilities of the players. But they did it well! Even the difficult fast passage for the bassoons in the third movement was played seemingly effortlessly. The dynamics were well expressed – never dull - and provided much excitement. Some of the players even appeared to be enjoying themselves!

My congratulations go not only to the players but to the conductor Robert Dick, who takes the orchestra to its limits and perhaps beyond; to the Leader of the Orchestra Tony Kime, who has himself also contributed immeasurably to the transformation of the orchestra in the last few years; and to the various soloists who gave us such pleasure at so many points during the concert.

Now I'm off to find the Berkeley.

Tony Bell

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