

Music review: Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Andrew Manze (****)



With an (almost) all-Beethoven programme featuring two of the composer's most celebrated works, it was hardly surprising that the Usher Hall was gratifyingly packed for Thursday night's thrilling SCO concert. It could have ended up as too much of a good thing to programme the 'Emperor' Piano Concerto and the 'Eroica' Symphony together – both are demanding, heavyweight, heroic works.


But the gleaming, transparent readings delivered by period-performance expert Andrew Manze, making a welcome visit as conductor, ensured a lightness and a sparkling drama to the performances that held the audience rapt.

Welsh pianist Llyr Williams, soloist in the 'Emperor' Concerto, raised more questions, however. His complete cycle of Beethoven piano sonatas in Greyfriars Kirk last August were sometimes wilfully contrary, and this was no ordinary performance of the 'Emperor' either.

Rather than grand and imposing, his outer movements were clear, crisp and assertive, sometimes verging on the clangorous – Williams can produce a truly piercing sound when he wants to. And instead of summoning a wash of gushing romanticism, his slow movement was restrained and clear-headed – yet no less moving for that.

There's an undoubted poetry to Williams's playing, but it's a brittle poetry, and his interpretations often seem full of sharp edges rather than rounded corners. That said, he gave a

fascinating, no-nonsense reading of the 'Emperor' Concerto that rejected empty pomposity and shallow wallowing in favour of astonishing technique, true vulnerability and remarkable honesty. His encore – a breathtaking traversal of Liszt's 'Tarantella' from Venezia e Napoli – almost brought the house down.

Manze's reading of the 'Eroica' Symphony, which Beethoven  famously wrote in honour of Napoleon only to furiously abandon the dedication when he discovered that Bonaparte had proclaimed himself emperor, was high on drama right from its resounding opening chords.

Yet Manze's striking interpretation, while agile and nimble, drew a glowing richness from the SCO players, the strings in particular producing a radiantly lustrous sound. There was an appealing fluidity to the funeral march, and a touching sense of inevitability to its imposing fugato. The concert's opener, the overture to Cherubini's little-known opera *Démophon*, again showed off the SCO's gleaming tones and Manze's long, beautiful lines.