

Nicola Benedetti 'Italy & The Four Seasons' at The Usher Hall ****



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Nicola Benedetti is undoubtedly the most famous violinist of her generation. What her fame does not always account for is the development of this player over the eleven years since she won BBC Young Musician in 2004, aged just 16. Now in her late twenties, Benedetti has grown from a precociously talented youngster to a musician and philanthropist of exceptional poise. A fierce champion of musical education, her work with the Sistema Project and the BBC's Ten Pieces initiative have put her fame to good use, whilst her on-stage charisma continues to fill concert halls around the world. Her 'Italy & The Four Seasons' Tour, which arrived at the Usher Hall on Saturday night, is a display of another of her passions - chamber music.

The **Vivaldi** concertos 'Il Grosso Mogul' and 'Le Quattro Stagioni' are wonderful, fizzy pieces, as refreshingly classic as a glass of Pimms in the middle of summer. They are, however, fiercely difficult to play. Benedetti and her string ensemble, drawn from musicians she has worked with in the past, presented a performance of clarity and precision. The communication within this accomplished group was also a joy to witness; what fun they seemed to be having. The addition of lutenist **Elizabeth Kenny** added much to the ensemble in terms of breadth of sound. It is a shame that the cellos - led by Benedetti's partner **Leonard Elschenbroich** - failed to judge the restraint and tact demanded of a Baroque continuo line and at times the balance was too bottom-heavy. Leader **Ilyoung Chae** led the ensemble with aplomb, keeping the electricity from

bubbling over the surface with a steady hand.

We returned from the interval to a new commission from prolific composer **Mark-Anthony Turnage**. The five short movements of 'Duetti d'amore', written for and performed by Benedetti and Elschenbroich, perhaps revealed why there are so few unaccompanied duets for violin and cello. The instruments are just too similar in texture. Surprisingly cold and with little to say for itself, the commission hit the evening's only dull note, despite Benedetti and Elschenbroich playing well. As the American gentleman behind me noted, it was not unlike watching one of Woody Allen's later films- superficial and slightly uncomfortable.

Of the original ensemble, a sextet regrouped for the evening's finale, **Tchaikovsky's** 'Souvenir de Florence' Op. 70. Here the concert returned to form. Marvellously rich and fun, Tchaikovsky wrote the main theme for this work whilst visiting Florence in 1890. The sextet produced a gloriously rounded sound, almost reminiscent of a brass choir at some points. Credit for this is due in part to a wonderful viola section, filling out the texture and giving it a heart in that understated way only violists can. Elschenbroich seemed far more comfortable with this material than the earlier Vivaldi works, and his duet with Benedetti in the second movement revealed the understanding between the two musicians that Turnage had failed to communicate in his work.

The Tchaikovsky provided an hypnotic end to what was a surprisingly intimate recital. Whilst it strayed slightly from its Italian theme and hit the odd dull note, the concert provided an enjoyable evening of chamber music played by some of very fine string players.

I believe it might have worked better in a smaller venue, such as The Queens Hall., however, there is no denying that Benedetti can fill any venue and will no doubt continue to do so throughout this tour of the UK and Ireland. When she's on

stage you just don't want to watch anyone else. It must be hard to play second fiddle (or cello) to that.



Nicola Benedetti 'Italy & The Four Seasons' Tour will run throughout the UK and Ireland until September 30th. Benedetti appears in association with Raymond Weil Watches.