

Review – RSN0 Beethoven 6 / Penderecki / Christopher Gough

For the latest offering as part of their ‘Digital Season’ the RSN0 presented Beethoven’s 6th ‘Pastoral’ Symphony along with two more recent shorter pieces – Penderecki’s *Adagio for Strings* and a world premiere performance of Christopher Gough’s *Three Belarusian Folk Songs*, written for RSN0 principal ‘cellist Aleksei Kiseliov.

Having previously been unimpressed by the imaginative pairing of Beethoven with... more Beethoven, I truly must commend the RSN0’s latest choice of programme.

Programming ‘classical’ concerts nowadays is a complex and unforgiving task and larger orchestras (with bigger venues to fill) have increasingly focussed on works they know will attract audiences – the ‘old favourites’ of which Beethoven is a prime example. Just look at what has happened to the BBC proms over the last few years, as their once trailblazing contemporary music proms have been gradually cut or moved out from the main series to external locations. So, to see the RSN0 boldly produce such a varied (but entirely complementary) programme is heartening, and the truth is that the concert as

a whole really benefitted as every new piece felt fresh and dynamic. One of my favourite things is hearing very different musical 'voices' in the same concert and I couldn't have thought of a more intriguing combination of three distinctive composers.

The *Adagio for Strings* is Penderecki's contribution to a quorum of pieces of which Barber's *Adagio* is probably the best known example. Like the Barber (taken from a string quartet), Penderecki's *Adagio* was originally a movement from a longer piece, his Third Symphony, but unlike the Barber is orchestrated 'down' from a full orchestra. Penderecki is something of an enigma in 20th century music, having risen to fame as a poster-boy of the avant-garde with radically experimental pieces such as the *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* but then swiftly moving towards a relatively 'conservative', post-romantic later style. The *Adagio* stems from this later phase, consisting of weaving, melodious (although occasionally dissonant) chromatic counterpoint that is far more reminiscent of Shostakovich than Stockhausen. I can't help but feel the irony in this – that Penderecki wrote experimental music in a Soviet Union suspicious of any and all progressive musical ideas, only to emerge into the Western musical culture and alight on a style far more akin to Soviet composers than his Western contemporaries. Nevertheless in the *Adagio* Penderecki has nothing of the serious, self-absorbed navel-gazing of Shostakovich, and there is an earnestness to its emotion that speaks of a composer intent on directly addressing the listener. It is music from the heart in a way that only an artist engaged profoundly with the world around them could create.

The piece is unquestionably beautiful in many regards, and doesn't lose anything of its interest by being arranged for strings; if anything it becomes even more remarkable in the spectrum of colour the music can express. But there was something about it that just left me feeling a bit unfulfilled

– the piece constantly moved between episodes in a way that belied any sense of narrative. For a seasoned composer as Penderecki this lack of structural integrity is surprising, and probably comes from the second-hand nature of its material. As a middle movement of a Symphony this probing of new themes would function as the exploratory filling of the structural sandwich, but without the other movements simply seems a bit rambling and incoherent. For a piece with such obvious promise it is unfortunate it wears its colours on its sleeve as ‘concert padding’.

Three Belarusian Folk Songs, commissioned as part of the ‘Scotch Snaps’ series of short compositions by living Scottish composers, was a vibrant setting of both old and relatively new Belarusian folk melodies for solo ‘cello and orchestra by young composer Christopher Gough, who is also the orchestra’s principal horn player. Written personally for the RSN0’s (Belarusian) principal ‘cellist Aleksei Kiseliiov, the piece was about as topical as it could get: openly conceived with the ongoing political instability in the wake of the Belarusian general election in mind and including the song ‘Kupalinka’, the unofficial anthem of the Belarusian protest movement. Gough’s music appropriately had a very ‘current’ feel to it, with a mixture of striking orchestral effects and sweeping modal melodies reminiscent of contemporary film scores.

The first movement, ‘Leciele zurauli’ (‘the flying cranes’) opened with startling chimes from the percussion and plucked strings (intended like a protester’s wake-up call, perhaps?) and continued with a raw, punchy orchestration that starkly contrasted with Penderecki’s reverent treatment of the strings. Gough’s sound-world is eclectic, at times showing the influence of minimalists like Steve Reich, the song-like quality of Vaughan Williams, or consciously imitating pop music, all the time grounded by the timeless folk tunes, but somehow it feels entirely coherent. Movement two, ‘Sztoj pa

moru' ('There by the sea') was a fast dialogue between the soloist and the ensemble with all the unbounded energy and joi-de-vivre of a drinking song. Betraying Gough's impish sense of humour the movement was over almost in a flash; an exhilarating palate-cleanser between the more poignant outer movements.

Movement three, 'Kupalinka', was the most blatant in embodying the spirit of contemporary Belarus, with all the mournful resignation of a protest movement that remains essentially powerless. Throughout the work Kiseliov demonstrated incredible sensitivity to the music (after all, he did have a hand in choosing the folk tunes) but this was especially noticeable with the plaintive Kupalinka melody.

He had astonishing control over his instrument; typically using a robust tone, perhaps slightly brighter than most (and pleasantly so), but also capable of a hauntingly light, breathy tone when it suited the morose character of the movement. There were some really special moments in this movement, including a beautiful double-stopped section for the soloist followed by undulating, soft dissonances in the other strings that reminded me very much of Arvo Pärt's orchestral music. I think this is the true genius of Gough's work, and why it feels quite so fresh – it blends elements from a vast array of different styles (giving everyone something to relate to) into a bizarrely homogenous whole. Perhaps this isn't too surprising for someone trained as a film, TV and game composer – where musical style is often used as an indication of character rather than an identifier of a particular composer – but given how composers of concert music tend to shy away from anything that isn't explicitly individualistic this very 'happening' attitude is a breath of fresh air. And despite the obvious external influences, the music felt entirely unique – if anything the fact Gough laid bare his inspiration as a composer made it feel even more personal.

The Pastoral Symphony definitively marks Beethoven's departure

from the classical style of his earlier works. In giving each of the movements a title as part of a larger narrative ('Awakening of cheerful feelings on arriving in the country', 'Scene by a brook', 'Peasants' merrymaking', 'Thunderstorm' and 'Shepherds' Hymn') Beethoven paves the way for the huge programmatic symphonies and tone poems of the next two centuries. In the Beethoven Meister's conducting really stood at the fore of the performance – perhaps because older pieces afford conductors a touch more interpretive leeway.



Soloist Midori and the RSNO

Despite his technique sometimes looking a touch awkward (suffering from a perennial problem of not always knowing what to do with his free hand) his emotive direction of the orchestra through gesture and facial expression was forthright and uncompromising. Conductors could so easily fall into the trap of simply going through the motions with such a bread-and-butter piece, but Meister clearly had a vision and stopped at nothing to achieve it. One of these bolder decisions was to take the first movement at a far faster pace than most – not necessarily the tempo, which was only marginally faster than might be usual, but in powering through without any real sense of lingering between sections.

This approach definitely lent the piece a fresh, springtime energy well-suited to the subject, but the overall effect was that the Beethoven's careful structural 'punctuation' became lost and the movement began to feel slightly directionless. By contrast his approach to the second movement was elegance personified, including a perfect moment where you could practically see the fish jumping in the brook from his gestures and radiant smile. This is one unquestionable benefit of these pre-recorded, edited videos (especially for a reviewer!); you never miss anything from a soloist or conductor. Throughout the later movements Meister continued to grip the orchestra like a sorcerer, with another brilliant

moment being the dreading opening of the 'Thunderstorm'; Meister's hyper-emotivity beyond doubt won the day here. Nevertheless I did feel the last three movements lost some of their drama in the wake of the energy of the blistering first movement, inadvertently undermining the narrative impetus that sits at the heart of the symphony.

Overall the orchestra's playing was clean, professional and responsive, handling a diverse programme with aplomb. There is a risk with concerts like these that an orchestra can sound far more comfortable with a favoured composer or period but each composer's music came off the page as if they were leading the orchestra themselves. The only real criticism I could make is that there were some moments of weaker ensemble during the Beethoven, particularly the second movement, noticeable at points of speeding up or slowing down.

Still the Beethoven contained some of the most commendable performances from the players, such as the cute bird calls of the second movement, and a special mention has to go to principal oboist Adrian Wilson and principal clarinettist Timothy Orpen who simply seemed to own their solos from start to finish. Once again the RSNO's classy presentation of the concert really enriched the listening experience, with interviews before each of the pieces with the musicians and extensive use of (visual) cuts to focus on individual performers during the music. Especially noteworthy were the interview with the composer Christopher Gough before his piece, and an enlightening introduction to the Beethoven by clarinettist Orpen.



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Although perhaps not deliberate, the binding feature for all three composers represented here was that they write or wrote music in reaction to wider political circumstances. As the Soviet Bloc withered and disintegrated Penderecki shifted from allying himself with Western avant-gardists to embracing his Eastern European predecessors to express his musical vision of a post-Soviet Poland. Beethoven famously despised despotism to the extent that he angrily rescinded the dedication to Napoleon of the 3rd symphony, and perhaps the Pastoral symphony is symbolic of his longing for simpler times before the ravages of the Napoleonic Wars. And today Gough writes in reaction to a developing political crisis. Despite Beethoven's prominent billing, the gems of the concert were undoubtedly the more recent pieces and I wonder if one of Beethoven's more impassioned symphonies, such as the Eroica or the Fifth, might have been a better fit – this really is splitting hairs though. The mere fact that the RSN0 put on such a varied concert, effortlessly shifting between styles to make each piece feel unique and dignified, deserves fervent praise. If this can set a new precedent for programming concerts, with exciting, relevant combinations of repertoire, the future is indeed bright.

The RSN0's 'Digital Season' continues on Friday 18 December with Beethoven's 7th Symphony, Mozart's 5th 'Turkish' Violin Concerto (soloist: Francesca DeGo) and Overture to 'Die Entführung aus dem Serail', conducted by Cornelius Meister.

15 January 2020 – Karen Cargill as soloist with James Lowe conducting.

To book your place or view the entire brochure visit www.rsno.org.uk/digital-season

Director of Concerts and Engagement, Bill Chandler, said: “This is a Season unlike any other and we are grateful to our supporters, audiences, musicians and visiting artists for being so understanding of the challenging circumstances we are all working under. We are working hard to deliver high-quality Digital Season concerts, which means we have a bit of a juggling act behind the scenes as we factor in artist schedules, travel restrictions, and ever-changing developments of COVID-19.

“As we continue to prioritise the health and wellbeing of all musicians involved in the Digital Season we are strictly following all travel and quarantine guidance, which unfortunately has resulted in changes to a few concerts. We thank our supporters for their understanding at this time.”

