Review – RSNO Beethoven 5 / Britten / Walker

Last Friday, those who tuned in were treated to a wonderfully diverse programme in the final performance of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra's inaugural 'Digital Season', a series of concerts broadcast online from the RSNO Centre in Glasgow, conducted by Thomas Søndergård.

The programme opened with George Walker's *Lyric for Strings*. Walker, who died in 2018 at the age of 96, was until recently a relatively unknown composer, not just in the UK but also in his native United States – perhaps in part due to the prejudice of post-war society towards Walker's African-American ancestry.

On paper, the *Lyric* has glaring similarities to Barber's famed *Adagio* written not quite a decade earlier, both being arrangements of movements from string quartets. In practice, however, the comparison doesn't do either piece any justice, and the Walker particularly suffers from it.

Unlike the Barber, which is really one long musing on a single theme, Walker's *Lyric* consists of a number of small, contrapuntal episodes somewhat loosely strung together (something of a feat within the piece's 6-minute runtime!).

These episodes are compelling and impressively complex without *sounding* complex – always the true measure of good counterpoint – but sadly don't seem to go anywhere, with Walker simply moving on to another idea rather than fully 'working out' the material.

This problem is strangely similar to that of another piece evoking the Barber I reviewed recently, Penderecki's *Adagio for Strings*, as in both cases I feel this explorative writing would make far more sense were the piece not divorced from its original context as an inner movement of a larger work. At least in the Walker this could be put down to youthful inexperience. Ultimately I'd say the piece is pleasant to listen to, but lacking in substance; and far from the profundity of the Barber.

Further, unlike Barber's piece which has almost become the epitome of American music in the early 20th century, Walker's sound-world in the *Lyric* somehow seems far more 'English' than anything else, with hints of Elgar or Vaughan Williams but a striking likeness to the music of Herbert Howells, particularly in the peculiar and almost unique blend of modal melody within a post-romantic framework, quite unlike the forward-looking modalism of say Debussy or Vaughan Williams.

Maybe it isn't surprising, therefore, that Walker's music is becoming more popular 'closer to home' and it seemed to totally complement the Britten that followed it. While it is right that contemporary orchestras champion Walker and other neglected composers (as the programme note euphemistically called it: 'unforgetting' them), I hope they will look beyond his shorter, 'programme-filler' pieces (amusingly he claimed himself to write shorter pieces because it increased the chance of them being performed!) and give his music the top billing it deserves. Should this advocacy continue, I look forward to seeing how Walker's more mature works build on this curiously Transatlantic style.

Next up was Britten's *Les Illuminations*, with tenor soloist Nicky Spence. Written in 1939, towards the end of Britten's youthful phase before the horrors of WWII made him far more pensive and morose, the song cycle sets poetry by Rimbaud for tenor and orchestral strings. Although the original version was for Soprano soloist, the tenor version has achieved equal if not greater recognition, likely through its association with Britten's partner Peter Pears.

Homegrown tenor soloist Nicky Spence

Rimbaud's poetry is equal parts surreal and sensual, its heightened and bizarre imagery something like a dreamscape that is at times on the verge of becoming a nightmare. Out of this Britten forms a cycle of nine short movements, with a narrative that becomes gradually more and more unsettling, before a relaxed finale – still somehow disturbed, but resigned to its fate. Most are orchestral songs, but there are two predominantly instrumental settings of the simple phrase that permeates the work, 'Only I possess the key to this savage parade', the blistering opening 'Fanfare' and the pensive sixth 'Interlude'.

Throughout, but particularly in these punctuating movements,

the RSNO strings formed a tight ensemble, capable of bringing to life all the characters of Britten's expansive gamut of orchestral effects. But the bulk of the credit for this lively and compelling performance must go to Scots tenor Nicky Spence.

His versatility as a vocalist was astonishing, with a broader, richer quality in the mid- and lower ranges that would be far more typical of a baritone, yet entirely capable of both a steely 'forte' and a poised 'sotto voce' in even the highest registers. This command of his art was especially noticeable in his stunningly accurate intonation in the second movement ('Villes'), his spine-tingling soft top notes in the opening of the third ('Phrase') and his agility and control with the aspirated, staccato phrases in the fifth ('Marine') and the rapid semiquavers of the seventh ('Parade').

Yet most of all, during the whole performance Spence displayed a truly special sense of confidence with the drama of the work, his earnest, unpretentious attitude inhabiting the musical narrative (as his biography puts it, he is a 'singing actor'), without falling into the singers' trap of seeming laboured or melodramatic. Having Spence as soloist was a real treat – especially given he was brought in last-minute as the originally-billed soloist was held up by travel restrictions. I sincerely hope we will see more of Spence singing with the RSNO and other Scottish ensembles on our screens and, hopefully not too far off, in our concert halls.

The focal point of the concert was Søndergård's long-awaited direction of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The Fifth is almost certainly Beethoven's best-known and most iconic work; universally recognisable through its famous opening motif. Although not as glaringly revolutionary as his final, 'Choral' symphony, it was carefully innovative in a way that cemented its position as the archetype of the symphony genre. Beethoven's unity of conception and form throughout the entire work, constantly referring to and adapting the same thematic

material, paved the way for symphonists through to at least the mid-20th century, including Brahms, Mahler, Vaughan Williams and Shostakovich.

With such a crucial part of Beethoven's oevre I was keen to see Søndergård's interpretation, having been intrigued since hearing him conduct the First Symphony last year to know what his approach to the Fifth would be; especially as his last Beethoven commitment with the RSNO was curtailed due to travel restrictions. I've made no secret of my apathy towards much of Beethoven's music, which often seems overly boisterous in its use of effect over form, but one piece of his I truly admire is the Fifth Symphony, the crystallisation of his style, with all the romantic drama of his maturity but without the saturated excess of his later years.

Even from the opening bars I could tell Søndergård's approach to the Fifth would be quite radical. Much like some of the other RSNO Beethoven performances, his tempo for the opening movement was a touch faster than what I would consider 'conventional' (although, this could reflect a general trend in contemporary orchestras) but more noticeably there was little in the way of lingering at pauses at all.

I think I can see what Søndergård was going for here – trying to convey Beethoven's boundless energy by turning what can be a fragmented series of gestures into a more connected string of consciousness – but unfortunately this seemed, to me at least, to have quite the opposite effect. By removing the sense of tension Beethoven consciously creates through the music becoming completely stationary, this approach eroded the movement's clear sense of structure. The resulting rush of musical ideas running into one another was exciting, for sure, but at the expense of making Beethoven's careful writing seem careless and undisciplined. This became glaringly obvious during the brief solo from the principal oboist, whose subtle rubato left far more room for reflection and provided a moment

of the contrast I so craved.

Nevertheless there was a consistency to Søndergård's vision, and it was far more successful in the other movements, I feel. Clearly he was aiming for a more raging, fiery Beethoven than one often hears, and to audiences accustomed to modern instruments with their smooth and reliable sound it is worthwhile to remember that for the quieter but more unpredictable instruments of Beethoven's day his music would have seemed raw and unhinged, constantly at the very edge of stability.

The strings especially engaged with this rawness, most noticeably in the first and third movements, producing a colourful and warm sound that is far more characteristic of a chamber ensemble than a symphony orchestra, and just one of the things that sets the RSNO apart as an ensemble that is not afraid to challenge the orchestral 'status quo' to achieve the best and most appropriate musical result.

Conductor Thomas Søndergård and the RSNO

For me the highlight of the symphony had to be the second movement. Søndergård's angsty interpretation of the first movement, lending an ominous feeling to even the calmer

passages, seemed a total contrast to the second, almost seeming mocking in its jaunty opening, explosive outbursts, and cynical parodies of courtly dances.

The woodwind especially shone forth here – forming a tight and co-responsive ensemble, even down to their playful eye contact. The overall effect was full of character, effortlessly flitting between soft, feigned romance, bawdy humour and the enduring, raging fire. I think this is perhaps the true genius of the Fifth – that, unlike many symphonies where the real showpieces are the first and final movements, Beethoven never lets up with the inner movements being little gems in their own right.

The third movement also had its fair share of special moments, including stunning agility in the faux fugue, especially from the bassoons, and a creeping, almost inaudible final strain of the third movement's version of the main theme – a daring effect which seemed maybe a touch extreme, but certainly heightened the sense of foreboding and fed into the 'on the edge' aesthetic of Søndergård's interpretation. And the transition into the radiance of the final movement was pure joy – all the fire of the previous movements transformed into a blaze of glory.

Despite my reservations about the opening movement, Søndergård's interpretation seemed to capture Beethoven's stormy and brash character astonishingly well; it is refreshing that even after 250 years conductors continue to find new facets to this music! His unashamed self-indulgence seemed to suit Beethoven's introspective but self-assured personality perfectly, although I suspect the rest of the orchestra could have done without the vast sections where he conducted nobody except the first violins, with the poor cellists left only to stare at his back. He did sometimes seem dangerously close to falling into maestro-ism, that old attitude of the conductor being this isolated genius who can only impose their own interpretation on the orchestra, where

ultimately the interpretation is either the conductor's or the players', rather than a collective effort. But there again, perhaps this uncompromising attitude is just what the great composer would have wanted and – through his tempestuous and bold demeanour – there were moments where I almost thought it could be Beethoven himself on the podium.

Although the season has now concluded, you can still 'book' to view some of the previous concerts from the comfort of your own home – including last Friday's performance – at the RSNO website.

Their second Digital Season commences on 16 April, with Nicola Benedetti and the RSNO performing Weinberg, Szymanowski and Panufnik.