

Review: RSN0 Digital Season – full orchestra season so far...

From April to June the Royal Scottish National Orchestra returns for their Spring/Summer 2021 digital season. Following the success of their 2020 season, which made the very best of the tricky situation Covid-19 has put professional music ensembles in, their 2021 season is bigger, bolder and more ambitious in pretty much every way.

Being allowed back into their 'home' space of the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall has signalled something of a return to normalcy for the orchestra, no longer restricted due to space and numbers to works for smaller orchestra, although still not allowed in-person audiences. The repertoire for their full orchestral programme is suitably grand in scope, and seemingly far more varied too.



The RSN0, back in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall for their Spring/Summer 2021 Digital Season (photograph Martin Shields / RSN0)

The season opened with a Polish extravaganza, Thomas Søndergård conducting Weinberg's *Rhapsody on Moldavian Themes*, Andrzej Panufnik's Third Symphony *Sinfonia Sacra*, and crowned with Szymanowski's First Violin Concerto with the enduringly popular Nicola Benedetti. The Szymanowski has become something of a calling-card for Benedetti, being the piece with which she won BBC Young Musician of the Year, and I was tempted to suggest the RSN0 had been somewhat cynical in choosing the piece, but how wrong I was!

Her approach to the music was pure form and poise, with an almost solemn dedication that only comes from intimate familiarity with the work. Often longer works in a single movement struggle from being too loosely structured, but the concerto seemed to constantly move forward into new territory without feeling disjointed or ununified. This constant forward momentum was greatly down to the way Szymanowski pushed romantic harmony to its very limit, contrasting lush 'tonal'

passages with twisting, probing dissonance, creating glorious passages where the tension just pours on and on. It is testament to just how subtle and sensitive Benedetti's musicality is that I never had to distinguish whether it was her 'voice' or Szymanowski's I was hearing, the two forming an imperceptible symbiosis.



Nicola Benedetti and the RSN0 (photograph Martin Shields / RSN0)

Equally stunning was Panufnik's *Sinfonia Sacra*. It is a deeply spiritual work in four short movements: "Visions" I, II and III for the brasses alone, strings alone and full orchestra dominated by percussion respectively, and "Hymn" that serves as a summation and union of the various elements. The whole work is crafted around the Bogurodzica, an ancient chant melody with a special resonance in Poland; the second movement, "Vision II" was incredibly powerful, and the fourth, "Hymn", was simply beautiful, written in ever-unfolding counterpoint.

Throughout the performance, but in this work especially the

RSNO proudly proclaimed their return by seeming far more confident and composed than in the last season, with the brasses especially shining as an incredibly tight ship in spite of having to take a back seat last year.

Even Søndergård himself seemed like an entirely different conductor – while I felt his performance last year was sometimes nervy or uncomposed, this year he seems utterly in control, embodying the music with both great clarity and subtlety. Somewhat unfortunately I felt the Weinberg was quite a weak piece, and even the RSNO under the steady hand of Søndergård couldn't bring it to life for me. Although described as a rhapsody, it seemed to be more of a series of barely-connected 'episodes', often simultaneously foreboding and clownish, all of which are interesting diversions at the time but which didn't seem to really offer any feeling of grounding or progression. Weinberg was so obviously an imaginative composer, this just isn't his best piece.

The second of the series' full orchestra concerts marked the RSNO debut for Angus Webster, conducting two movements by Craig Armstrong from *The Lost Songs of St Kilda*, Brahms' Fourth Symphony, and Barber's Violin Concerto, with RSNO leader Maya Iwabuchi as soloist. Webster is something of a rising star of the conducting scene, but given just how brilliant his performance was I'm hoping this is the beginning of a long and lucrative partnership, and Iwabuchi was the ideal soloist to work with him.



Angus Webster in his stunning RSN0 debut
Despite the RSN0's evidently flawless performance, I have to admit that I found the Armstrong a bit dull, although I wouldn't necessarily call the music poorly composed, merely insensitively programmed on this occasion. The two movements, entitled "Stac Lee – Dawn" and "Stac Lee – Dusk" form Armstrong's contribution to a wider project to arrange various traditional tunes from the now-abandoned island of St Kilda which have been saved from obscurity by being passed down generations of off-island musicians.

The project sounds fascinating and I suspect that Armstrong's pieces would be far more satisfying if featured as part of the full set of pieces – however without these, and with no tangible link to any of the other music in the programme, they simply felt quite out of place. The two pieces seem more concerned with creating a particular atmosphere than portraying any musical narrative – something that perhaps betrays Armstrong's colours as a film composer – but with some contrasting movements could have formed a beautiful metaphor for the isolation of the abandoned island.

The Barber, however, was a crowning achievement on the part of

everyone involved. It is by no means a radically virtuosic concerto, as Iwabuchi modestly pointed out in her pre-concert interview, but the pure vibrancy of the performance was enough to make it a formidable spectacle. Iwabuchi played with a strident, full-bodied tone that was skilfully supported by Webster's lively treatment of the orchestra, who looked like they loved being conducted by him.

Webster had astonishing control of the orchestra for someone of just 22, yet without being at all imposing or didactic, and was perfectly aware of when to step well back and allow the soloist to lead the ensemble. While perhaps not the most elegant in terms of gesture, his clarity both of beat and musical expression created the perfect space for the players to flourish, and the rich sound was testament to that. Iwabuchi completely embodied Barber's music from start to finish, but this was especially noticeable in the second movement where she managed an almost impossible sense of intimacy befitting to the movement's somehow resplendent sadness.

Webster was no less brilliant in the Brahms, where it was obvious that he simply adored the music, and it was a joy to see a conductor with a genuine sense of wonder. I'm not entirely sure I've been won around to Brahms just yet, but under Webster's direction I could see glimpses of genius beneath the stuffy, formalist exterior.



Maya Iwabuchi as soloist in Barber's Violin Concerto

I don't think anyone could doubt that the pandemic has totally gutted the cultural sector. Musicians and other artists have been left not only without work but without a sense of purpose, and we are only just starting to witness the resurgence that could keep our diverse cultural heritage from slipping away entirely. Yet in the light of this the RSN0 have managed, somehow, to surpass the already dizzying heights of their last digital season. As well as now being allowed to meet as a full ensemble again for once-fortnightly concerts, the series has been augmented with chamber concerts to sate the appetite of those looking for a more intimate concert experience. And with as bold a start to the season as this, now is as good a time as ever to delve into the colourful sound-world of their full orchestra season... and who knows, by this time next year we might even be able to go and hear them in person.

The RSN0 Digital Season continues with full orchestra concerts every two weeks, the next being Dvořák's Fifth Symphony conducted by Marta Gardolińska on Friday 14 May, and chamber concerts on the intervening weeks. Both concerts reviewed above are still available to watch. You can find details of

the full series and book your online viewing [here](#).