

Tonbridge Philharmonic Society

Review by Ruth Langridge

Rimsky-Korsakov, Prokofiev & Tchaikovsky

St Peter & St Paul Church, Tonbridge

18 May 2019

An optimistic and exciting new chapter in the life of Tonbridge Philharmonic Society opened last night when new conductor Mark Biggins put the Orchestra through its paces in a well-balanced programme of Russian music.

First was *Sadko*, a rarely-heard tone poem by that master of orchestration, Rimsky-Korsakov. Setting episodes from a 12th century folk tale, the composer's musical word-painting tells the legend of the merchant and musician, Sadko. In only ten exhilarating minutes, we were entertained with music depicting a becalmed ship, Sadko being thrown overboard to appease the Sea King with wonderful glugging descending music and Sadko's 'lap harp' or *gusli*, admirably portrayed by harpist Anna Wynne. The dance music Sadko plays for the Sea King's daughter's wedding feast whips up a furious storm and boiling sea, until Sadko has no option but to break all the strings on his *gusli* with a resounding chord, to return to calm waters. The orchestra responded to Mark Biggin's urgent and decisive beat with the ever-changing rhythms and melodies passed from section to section.

Japanese violinist Yume Fujise was soloist in Prokofiev's 1st Violin Concerto, first performed in 1923. The orchestration in the opening is such that the soloist is nearly swamped, but we were soon dazzled by her depth of tone, ranging from visceral earthy, wild and energetic playing to the sweetest harmonics. The Scherzo requires virtuoso musicianship of the highest calibre, which Ms Fujise clearly demonstrated, ably accompanied by the orchestra, with the movement ending in a threatening and sinister manner. The lyrical, sensitive and passionate moments of the 3rd movement and ticking orchestral playing, were reminiscent of the clock moving towards midnight in Prokofiev's ballet *Cinderella*. Throughout, orchestra, soloist and conductor were fully engaged and gave us a stunning reading of this concerto.

Nearly everyone knows Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony, but this was a special and memorable performance. From the start, Mr Biggins drove his tempi and his players to great heights. Effective repeated *crescendi* built up tension, and the first movement's marking *con anima* was certainly observed. In the second movement the lower string section provided a solid and dependable obbligato for the orchestra. Melodies played

by the horn and oboe produced beautiful and poignant moments; one felt almost as if immersed in a warm bath. The strings excelled in the satisfying Waltz movement, and the Symphony's finale was a triumph: thrilling playing from all the sections, and Mark Biggins clearly revelled in pushing tempi and musicians to their limits.

Judging by the deafening applause, shouts of *bravo!* and repeated curtain calls for Mark Biggins, the audience felt, as I did that, had been a hugely enjoyable concert. He brought to their feet members of each section, all of whom had played their hearts out during the evening. Leader Susan Skone James also richly deserved her appreciative round of applause. Tonbridge Philharmonic Society is fortunate indeed with their new Music Director, not only an award-winning orchestral conductor, but also Assistant Chorus Master for ENO's Opera Chorus, among many other international appointments. We may be assured of great things to come.