

Tonbridge Philharmonic Society

Review by Sara Kemsley

Rachmaninov and Elgar

St Peter & St Paul Church, Tonbridge

16 February 2019

I approached this orchestral concert with two thoughts on my mind; how would guest conductor Michael Waldron step into the immense shoes of Matthew Willis and how would an amateur orchestra, however good, pull off the Rachmaninov 2nd Symphony? The first question was quickly answered as this young man led the orchestra through Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance March No. 4 with a calm authority. Balancing the quick, rather nervous march section with the broad and lyrical trio section is never easy. One can sound too slow or the other too fast but Michael judged this very well to give a measured interpretation, which was never trite.

There followed one of the finest cello concertos ever written, that in E Minor Op.85 also by Elgar. It was his last orchestral work and a very different animal. This brooding and intense piece was first presented at the end of a devastating World War. It baffled and alarmed the audience at the time but has since been adopted as a very special creation. International, prize-winning cellist Pavlos Carvalho put his stamp on it from the very first solo declamation. His resonant sound rang around the church and the orchestral accompaniment was sensitive and precise. Concertos are always testing for orchestras given the need to balance the one against the many and to allow for the individual ebb and flow of tempi and dynamics. Michael's clear and calm beat enabled the orchestra to meet the challenge with seeming effortlessness so that the audience could immerse itself fully in the narrative that the cello gave us.

So, why my concern that this orchestra might struggle with the mighty eloquence of Rachmaninov's 2nd Symphony? It is long by any standards for a symphony. Although written at the same time as Elgar's P & C Marches, it is firmly in a late Romantic style with long sweeping melodies and sections that feel like mountaineering. Each time you reach a summit you discover another one even higher beyond. The string writing is particularly sonorous and full-blooded. Phillip Huscher in his notes for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra described Rachmaninov aptly as having 'command of extended paragraphs and

... mastery of carefully controlled suspense'. As far as I am concerned, Tonbridge Phil., you nailed it!

As the Society moves into its new period with Music Director Designate Mark Biggins, it is in good shape. The strings, brass and choir have all developed their sound and technique very impressively but I want to put in a word for the small but significant woodwind section. They are individually talented players, who can be relied upon to do the job. So leave well alone, right? In my view (and here I declare a bias as a flautist), a little time and effort to put them on staging and to coach for tighter ensemble and intonation will ensure that the icing on the cake is as spectacular as the cake within.