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**Review of a Concert by The Tonbridge Philharmonic Society, by Sarah Kemsley**

**Tonbridge School Chapel - 17 February 2018**

I do not recall ever attending a concert given by amateur performers that received a spontaneous standing ovation at the end. That this concert, given by the Tonbridge Philharmonic Orchestra in the sacred space of Tonbridge School Chapel, was so received is an indication of what a stupendous occasion it was. I was anticipating a great programme, comprising three hugely significant works of the twentieth century, two American and one Russian, written within a six-year period between 1936 and 1942. I did not expect such a completely immersive experience from first note to last.

Conductor Matthew Willis has a flair for imaginative programming and theatrical presentation so we should not have been surprised that Aaron Copland's *'Fanfare for the Common Man'* began with none of the usual concert preamble of leader, conductor, polite applause. We fair jumped out of our seats as the first thunderous crash of timpani, bass drum and tam-tam rang around the chapel. We were now gripped for two hours of powerful, spell-binding, exciting, moving, sumptuous.... the adjectives just kept flowing through my mind.

Equally surprising was the immediate transition from the final chord of the fanfare for augmented brass and percussion into the first tremulous violin Bb of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Was this going to work? Oh yes, after the vibrant metallic A major ending of the fanfare, the next two gut-wrenching chords for full strings seemed even more plangent than usual. The string sound and sentiment achieved through ten minutes of very slow and sustained chording was breath-taking.

The third piece was the monumental *Leningrad Symphony (No. 7)* of Shostakovich, which is well over 70 minutes long. His music is characterised by huge dynamic contrast and the layering of instruments from a solitary flute to the full might of nearly one hundred players. Then there is the back story of how the piece was written during the Siege of Leningrad, its first performance by starving musicians to the starving populace with German troops at the gates, and the composer's ambiguous relationship with his own 'side' under the boot of Joseph Stalin. Our first sense of impending doom comes with the notoriously difficult tattoo beaten out on the snare drum, all 352 bars of it, from distant threat to cataclysmic onslaught. This was so well-controlled that the change then to the desolation of absolutely solo woodwinds was almost unbearable. The second movement narrative came through with lovely expressive soft solos and the first violins were superb throughout the concert. By the third movement, forget amateur! The augmented wind section achieved wonderful moments of clarity and the principals, especially clarinet and bassoon, produced sublime solo work. The fourth movement concluded our journey from despair and suffering to the triumph of the human spirit in the prolonged C major coda. No wonder we all stood up to applaud.