

October 2009 – Concert Review

Atmosphere. Landscape. Passion. These are the brochure's promises for York Guildhall Orchestra's concerts this season, whose centre pieces are Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies.

On Saturday it was the turn of Atmosphere, heard in Gershwin's American strutting his stuff round Paris and in six Richard Strauss songs.

But it was Tchaikovsky's Fourth that was the orchestra's real target. The players have clearly summered well: this was a supremely fresh, relaxed performance. If the violins are the engine-room of an orchestra, it is often the woodwinds that are the colour-focus. Over the past decade or so, the orchestra's winds – who include several excellent soloists – have enjoyed variable ensemble. But here they were breathing as one, and it tinted the entire symphony.

Just one instance was the immaculate woodwind choir answering the strings' clean, disciplined pizzicato in the Scherzo. And for solo playing, Jane Wright's finely focused oboe starting the second movement was perfectly balanced by Isobel Gamov's tellingly musical bassoon at the close.

Simon Wright had his players just where he wanted them in a cleverly-built first movement. In the finale, too, the violins responded magnificently to his demanding pace.

Lynne Dawson, the orchestra's new president, was in evocative form in the Strauss, her smooth legato making light of the hall's unwelcoming acoustic.

It was her innate feeling for the poetry – in the pianissimo reaches of Morgen (Morning), for example, or riding the swell in Zueignung (Dedication) – that carried the ring of truth. Atmosphere, indeed.

Martin Dryer
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