

Review of concert by Peebles Orchestra

on Saturday 17 May 2014

Take two instruments not often heard at orchestral concerts, along with two of their finest exponents, add our local orchestra, which seems to gain in confidence and stature with every performance, combine them in a fascinating and imaginative programme under the direction of an inspirational conductor, and you have the ingredients for a sensational concert. That is precisely what was served up in the Leckie Church on Saturday evening, where a packed audience applauded loud and long after every piece.

Neither the guitar nor the accordion has really established its place in the concerto repertoire, perhaps because of the challenges of balancing their sound against that of a full orchestra. Never afraid to take on a challenge, Peebles Orchestra ingeniously programmed a concerto for each instrument, followed by one for both. Any fears of soloists being drowned in a sea of orchestral sound were quickly banished, however, as all three pieces drew playing of great refinement and sensitivity and conductor Robert Dick kept masterful control of dynamics.

Nobody has done more than Scottish virtuoso Owen Murray to champion either the chromatic accordion or the concerto written for it by Gordon Jacob. Following the loss of the score, the piece remained unheard for ten years, until Owen discovered a handwritten copy in China last year. This Peebles performance marked its restoration to the repertoire and a most welcome return it is. From its brooding opening in lower strings through to its rousing conclusion, this is a wonderfully lyrical piece, with the accordion now wistful, now playful and with some delightful touches of colour added by glockenspiel, xylophone and violin (sweetly-played solos by the orchestra's leader, Lawrence Dunn). The occasion was made extra special by the presence in the front row of Mrs Hyatt Jacob, the composer's widow, who had travelled from London for the 're-launch' of the concerto and was absolutely thrilled by the performance.

Since reaching number three in the UK album charts in 1976, Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* has never lost its place as the best-known of all its composer's works, and with its combination of memorable tunes, virtuoso guitar part, and rich orchestral sound it is easy to see why. Leading Scottish guitarist Gary Macleod gave a wonderfully characterful performance, dealing effortlessly with the work's technical demands and delivering a spellbinding cadenza in the second movement. The orchestra, too, perfectly captured the warm Spanish atmosphere and added some beautiful solo contributions, particularly from cor anglais and bassoon for which there was well-deserved special applause at the end.

Piazzolla's Double Concerto for Bandoneon, Guitar and Strings brought both soloists into the spotlight and they combined magically in the haunting opening movement and in the song-like exchanges of the central 'milonga'. In this essentially tender and lyrical work, it wasn't until the finale that the composer's infectious 'Tango nuevo' rhythms really took over, with the orchestra driving the piece along irresistibly towards its close.

The evening began and ended with the orchestra alone, in two works by the teenage Schubert. The overture to '*Claudine von Villa Bella*', which began the concert, deserves to be better known, with its dramatic opening and streams of melody, but Robert Dick informed us that the Schubert Society of Great Britain has no record of a previous performance. Another first for Peebles Orchestra! We were on more familiar ground with the final work, Schubert's 3rd Symphony. The orchestra seemed to revel in having the floor to itself again, and gave a tremendously joyful account of this life-affirming work. All sections distinguished themselves, but mention must be made of John Levine, whose jaunty clarinet contributions earned him a special bow. Many agreed at the end that we have never heard the orchestra play better.

JPF