



As near to perfection as one could hope for

GEORGINA BENISON –

One hour before the beginning of both Russian concerts at the Royal Opera House Muscat last week, a pre-performance talk was given to ticket holders to explain and explore the highlights of each programme. On Wednesday evening Dr Nasser al Taei, Advisor to the Board of Directors at ROHM, presented the soloist, Sergej Krylov, who summed up the challenges of the two Violin Concertos he would play in Muscat. The Mendelssohn is very familiar to music lovers, but the technical difficulties may not be fully appreciated by everyone. For example, the opening bars presented huge leaps and intonation difficulties to soloists of even his calibre. Dr Nasser outlined the features of instrumentation and melodic themes in Saint-Saens', "Danse Macabre" in an enlightening talk which helped listeners gain a deeper understanding of the work. In Thursday evening's lecture, focus was given to Rimsky-Korsakov's interpretation of the exotic east in his lengthy tone-poem, "Scheherazade". Russian music of the late 19th century was beginning to move away from the strong influence of Western (German) composers, and find its own feet. Put in such context, it was interesting to learn why fascination with 'The Arabian Nights' provided such fertile inspiration to the emerging nationalist composers, who in turn had a huge effect on Tchaikovsky's style and sources.

Thursday's splendid performance opened with Saint-Saens' 1874 "Danse Macabre" op.40, with the leader of the Russian National Opera, Alexei Bruni, as Death's dexterous solo fiddle player, featuring the devil's forbidden tri-tones throughout the 8-minute symphonic poem. References to Berlioz' 'Dies Irae' were pertinent, along with the orchestral xylophone imitating the rattling of skeleton bones.

The focal work of the programme, and an opportunity to see and hear a living musical legend in our midst, was Tchaikovsky's 1878 "Violin Concerto in D major".

The first movement was immediately recognisable, while the second and third, played seamlessly without a break, less so. 48-year old, Russian-born Sergej Krylov has been acclaimed variously for his 'effervescent musicianship, intense lyricism and beguiling tonal beauty' which have secured him his place among today's most renowned performers. But words do not sum up his incredible stage presence, his skill of musical communication, and his brilliant technique, producing an apparent effortless achievement of perfection. He played an instrument built in 1980 by his own father, Alexander Krylov, who was an outstanding Russian violin maker. Coming from a musical background no doubt helps in the creation of a musical genius, but Krylov has that extra ingredient which demands total attention and awe-inspired admiration from audiences world-wide. The opening passages of the Tchaikovsky were filled with innovative ornamentation, so tender and poignant they were immediately arresting. The works on both nights were completely committed to memory, and yet he did not miss a beat. The faster arpeggio figures were completely accurate, articulate and incisive. The extended solo cadenza towards the end of the movement was astounding and further proof of Krylov's technical virtuosity, if that were needed. The second movement, 'Canzonetta: Andante' was beautifully executed with such precision and grace, it was quite literally breath-taking. It moved seamlessly to the fiery 'Allegro Vivacissimo' – and fast it was – parodying an energetic Russian dance which Sergej Krylov explored with panache and humour. He was playing for most of the concerto's considerable 34 minutes, yet he maintained composure and intensity until the end. A well-earned interval followed.

Rimsky-Korsakov's evocative 1888 symphonic suite, "Scheherazade" is well known as a piece of fine Russian orientalism. It is a substantial 42-minutes long in four distinct sections, though themes and motives permeate the whole work with rich, lush harmonies and imaginative orchestration. So which better band to perform it than the quarter-century old, Russian National Orchestra, under its Italian conductor, Pier Carlo Orizio.

Concert Master Alexei Bruni again performed the substantial solo role, playing Scheherazade's own tender, sensuous, winding theme with warmth and confidence. The Strings represented the feminine, sympathetic elements from the 'One Thousand Nights', and other musicians of the superb RNO unveiled layers of melodic description with perfect ensemble playing and beguiling orchestral colours. In contrast, the wind players provided poignant evocations of oriental themes, such as Olga Tomilova's haunting oboe obligatos, Andrei Shamidanov's relentless bassoon song and Igor Makarov's French horn counter-melodies, which rose above the velvet sonorities so amply achieved in the strings. Harpist, Svetlana Paramonova had a large role to play in the unfolding narrative with flautist, Maxim Rubtsov, playing beautifully, with breadth of gesture. The work was not meant to be programmatic – depicting tales from the Arabian Nights – but rather a reflection of the contemporary Russian interest in the East.

The conflicting relationship between Strings and a fantastic Brass section was resolved in a lyrical, and finally peaceful conclusion to "Scheherazade", the concert, and the visit from Russia's most eminent musicians. The audience did not acquiesce, but left the hall reluctantly in an excited flurry of superlative exclamations – how wonderful to have experienced this remarkable musicianship, and may they perform again in Muscat – soon.

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