

THE TIMES

March 27, 2006

BSO/Alsop

Geoff Brown at Lighthouse Poole

★★★★☆

It's still only March in the composer's centenary year, but performances of Shostakovich's first violin concerto have already been plentiful. Two new recordings by Sarah Chang and Daniel Hope; concert appearances, it seems, every other week. Even now, some fiddler on the planet is probably in its coils, caught perhaps in its mighty cadenza - five minutes of blood, sweat and tears.

James Ehnes was always going to be worth hearing in this work. The 30-year-old Canadian might not be a household name, but he's been regularly winning exuberant reviews for performances of insight and subtlety. He's getting another here for Wednesday's account with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and their red-cuffed wizard Marin Alsop.

Force and poetry. More than most executants, Ehnes found a way to balance these key ingredients, never sacrificing beauty of tone for the excitement of fist fights between bow and strings, yet still playing with fervour. His dark, soulful colouring cast its magic right from the opening; for the central passacaglia he avoided outright sobbing with the most carefully controlled vibrato.

Ehnes's spell was at its strongest during the cadenza. This is the section that sorts out the field. Fancy show-offs or real musicians? Ehnes showed himself the genuine article, eschewing stop-go attractions for the greater power of a gradual increase in heat and dynamics. Most exciting.

Alsop and the orchestra weren't twiddling thumbs either, though as always at Poole's Lighthouse the hurdle of the boxy acoustic remained. What the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra needs, along with all the London orchestras, is Birmingham's Symphony Hall, a building that complements and enhances rather than pours cold water.

Even so, Elgar's second symphony, after the interval, kept up very respectable temperatures. Alsop's firm structural control was much in evidence as imperial blaze mutated into the tenderest yearning, and I loved the last pages of thoughtful repose.

A pity that reality then had to strike: the Dolphin Shopping Centre, and the cold wait for a bus.