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All verve and bardic brooding

Geoffrey Norris reviews Thomas Carroll/RPO at Cadogan Hall and James Ehnes at Wigmore Hall

Two string players in their early thirties made an impressive showing this week, illustrating the strength and breadth of artistry that the new generation harbours.

Thomas Carroll, appearing with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, played Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme in a programme, sprucely conducted by Paul Watkins, that also included the same composer's Serenade for Strings and the Symphony No 35 by Mozart.

It was a neat choice of repertoire. Tchaikovsky's adoration of Mozart's works is well-known, and the Rococo Variations display the delight he derived from 18th-century musical manners.

There have been moves in recent times to perform the piece as Tchaikovsky wrote it, but Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, the cellist who gave the première in 1877, knew a thing or two about dramatic effect.

His version, slightly shorter and with the variations in a different order, has long held sway, and was the one that Carroll chose here.

His ample, warm, sensitively modulated cello timbre suited the slower, lyrical variations ideally.

At the same time he had the wherewithal to negotiate the tricky finger-work of the faster ones, and to project the music's passion and virility, the cadenza being a particularly fine blend of virtuosity and emotional inwardness.

Watkins, himself a cellist, conducted with notable understanding of the soloist's position in the scheme of things and with an ear well-tuned to the orchestra's palette of sonorities.

On the previous day, the Canadian violinist James Ehnes gave a superb lunchtime recital of Dvorák, Bartók and Pablo Sarasate, unfazed by a mobile phone that went off just as he was about to start. Indeed, he even laughed it off, patting his pockets to see if it was his.

There is a wonderfully relaxed atmosphere about an Ehnes concert, and, in recitals, the close artistic rapport he has established with his customary pianist Eduard Laurel is patent. But behind the composure there lies a technical arsenal second to none, and a musical sensibility of extraordinary perception and communicative power.

In Dvorák's G major Sonatina, the fusion of thrust, rhythmic verve and, in the slow movement, bardic brooding gave this familiar piece an exhilarating freshness; in Sarasate's outrageous Introduction and Tarantella, the technical wizardry was astonishing, while always being marked by Ehnes's glorious violin sound and spectrum of colour.

Bartók's Sonata for solo violin, matching rugged counterpoint with contemplative serenity, was a tour de force of textural clarity and stylistic awareness.