

Concert: Ehnes/Laurel

Richard Morrison
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Wigmore Hall



Mercifully free of affectation or vanity, yet blessed with as stunning a technique and as intriguing a musical personality as any violinist on the circuit, James Ehnes seems set to become one of classical music's biggest names. The 30-year-old Canadian is not quite there on the fame front yet, as was apparent from too many empty seats at this Radio 3 Lunchtime Concert. But he's there as an artist, as this superb programme confirmed.

Ehnes has many sides to his talent. On his 1715 Stradivarius he produces a simply gorgeous palette of timbres — sometimes warm and velvety, sometimes with the pellucid clarity of lark song at dawn, elsewhere thrillingly powerful and incisive. His performance of Dvorák's slight but charming *Sonatina in G* — with Eduard Laurel supplying elegant supporting touches on the piano — was much in the first vein: not only genial and lyrical, but flecked with delicious little portamento slides that added hugely to the requisite salon atmosphere.

What followed could not have provided a greater contrast or a more gripping testament to Ehnes's powers. From memory he delivered a reading of Bartók's massive *Sonata for solo violin* that almost made light of the fiendish technical challenges: the epic double-stopped chords of the opening movement; the vast fugue (a homage to Bach) that gives the illusion of interplay between several instruments; the anguished chromaticism of the slow movement; and then the frenetic finale that buzzes and glows like a firefly.

But Ehnes did something even more impressive than that. He gave this complex and sometimes enigmatic 1944 work a heart and a soul. The ear was gripped by his music-making, not his virtuosity.

After this red meat came the cream-topped dessert: Sarasate's *Introduction and Tarantella*, one of the great show-off items in the fiddle repertoire. The speed was thrilling, the G-string tone wonderfully luscious, and the later pyrotechnics properly dazzling. But even here there was a sense of a particular time and epoch being explored with taste and integrity. The encore was Fritz Kreisler's *Liebeslied*, done with an admirably light touch and in so delicate and beguiling a tone that one imagined Kreisler himself tapping his bow on his celestial music stand in appreciation.