

Grampian Youth Orchestra Summer Concert 2017

Jonathan Hargreaves: Conductor

Amy Birse: Violin Soloist

St Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen

Sunday 18th June 2017

Reviewed by Alan Cooper

The House Full signs were up outside St Andrew's Cathedral as a long queue of patrons waited to be admitted, eager to take their seats for the latest concert by Grampian Youth Orchestra. Memories of last year's successful concert by the nearly seventy strong orchestra, combined with this year's hugely popular programme of favourite Romantic works by Wagner, Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky, ensured that Sunday's programme would be a sell-out. I do not believe that anyone could have been disappointed with what from beginning to end was an absolutely fabulous performance. It was conducted with real élan by Jonathan Hargreaves, and in the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in e minor, serene confidence combined with spirited technical brilliance were the hallmarks of Amy Birse's brilliant solo performance.

The concert opened with a splendidly potent account of Wagner's Prelude to Act One of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. The richness of the orchestral playing in the opening march was carried on throughout the piece. The tuba and the double basses gave the music its strong foundation. The horn section was instantly impressive and the strings delivered Wagner's melodies with admirable fluency. The Grampian Youth Orchestra owes its beginnings to the Aberdeen International Youth Festival. I remember the early days of the Festival when the Music Hall played host to several large orchestras from Germany, Holland, Japan and the USA and I feel that now the Grampian Youth Orchestra would be able to stand proudly alongside some of these great orchestras. The sense of vitality generated by the orchestra's performance of Wagner's music reminded me of those past glories.

I was impressed by how the orchestra provided Amy Birse with a superbly well judged accompaniment in the Mendelssohn Concerto. It was obviously well rehearsed since at no point was Jonathan Hargreaves having to rein in the orchestra to let the soloist come through. They seemed ready to do what was required unbidden.

Amy's playing was strong and clear, yet delicate and wonderfully detailed too. In the first movement she captured the full richness of Mendelssohn's delicious melodic writing and the dazzlingly detailed fingerboard work too. Every detail of the cadenza was perfectly polished. The woodwinds led us beautifully into the second movement in which Amy really made her violin sing and in the Finale she attacked Mendelssohn's lively music with just the right cheeky spirit — what the Germans would call "keck", that is to say "pertly". I loved it!

The second half of the concert was devoted to Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. The sombre delivery of the "motto" theme which recurs in different guises throughout the symphony was

delivered splendidly by the clarinets and bassoons accompanied by the cellos. The horns again and indeed the entire brass section played splendidly in the opening movement. The lovely horn solo in the second movement sang out faultlessly and oboe had his moment of glory too. In this movement the strings gave their melody a glossy polish.

The third movement had the spirit of dance in the strings especially and in the Finale the brass were glorious, the trumpets giving the music its shining golden glow. The conclusion of the symphony reached white hot excitement, full of energy and perhaps unusually for Tchaikovsky a feeling of boundless optimism. That is exactly what you need from a youth orchestra and that is what they gave us in this performance. Oh, how I wish I was young again like them!