

Manchester Classical Music

Friday, 9 June 2017

Review of Manchester Camerata at Manchester Cathedral

Manchester Camerata finished its season with a world premiere – a concerto for two cellos and orchestra by Colin Riley, titled *Warp and Weft*. Gábor Takács-Nagy conducted in this and a symphony each by Haydn and Mozart, and Adi Brett led the orchestra and was also soloist with Caroline Pether in Philip Glass's *Echorus*, just after the interval.

The new work was described as the world's first double cello concerto, and in Guy Johnstone and Gabriella Swallow it had top-class soloists to bring it to birth (and, incidentally, make up an all-Chet's line-up in its creation, as they and Riley are all alumni of the music school).

It's certainly unlike a standard solo concerto in make-up and impact, despite its apparent three-movement content. Beginning very softly with a single, long-held note for one of the cellos, at first it builds an ever-denser chordal texture and introduces long and languid solo lines for the soloists while a virtuoso percussion role brings most rhythmic and indeed colouristic activity to the sound. The soloists eventually take their cue from the energetic kitchen noises, while the latter eventually seem to collapse from sheer overload, while soloists and strings sustain high, multi-part chords.

The centre movement is marked by stillness throughout, with slow glissandi chords almost reminiscent of the magical similar effects in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Tension quickly grows to a passionate climax, with help from the ever-active percussion, and equally rapidly subsides into reverie and multi-layered chords once more. In the third movement the cellos sing a mournful song together, while the percussion provide both rhythmic drive and timbral interest, and tremolando strings form a halo of sound. The tempo quickens, then staggers to a halt, before an acceleration, a pause and then frantic flurries and guttural percussion leading to the finish.

So there is little opportunity for showmanship for the named soloists – indeed, they share their role at times with the orchestral cellos, making for a more concertante-style contrast than a soloistic one. The structure is episodic in effect, and though Riley has created several notable ideas it's difficult to see how they interconnect or hold together. Maybe he was trying to achieve too many different things at one go. Significantly, the biggest cheer from the audience was for percussionist Janet Fulton at the end.

The short work by Philip Glass, played without conductor, made an interesting contrast. Its regular, repetitive unfolding of string textures over a simple chordal sequence (and figurations not unlike Bach's opening prelude of the '48') were full of atmosphere and thoughtfulness.

The two symphonies received the imaginative and neatly pointed treatment, from the full orchestra, typical of Takács-Nagy's interpretations. Haydn's no. 38 (the 'Echo') began with charmingly emphatic phrasing and awareness of the many respects in which echo effects permeate its construction (in the first movement as well as the more obvious examples in the second). Its third and fourth movements have marvellously brilliant writing for solo oboe, a challenge to which Rachael Clegg rose like a star.

Mozart's 'Linz' (no. 36, K425) has almost equally prominent roles for both oboe and bassoon in its Minuet and finale, which was an appropriate piece on which to bow out for the Camerata's long-serving principal bassoon, Laurence Perkins, making his final appearance as a member of the orchestra. Needless to say, it was impeccably played and modestly contributed – from a player who is both expert and self-effacing and will be much missed.

Posted by **Robert Beale** at 00:54

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