

MUSIC

Joshua Bell/Academy of St Martin in the Fields

Usher Hall



We're getting an all-round picture of US superstar violinist Joshua Bell, resident artist at this year's International Festival. Not only as a recitalist and chamber musician in two Queen's Hall concerts, but also as a concerto soloist and orchestral director. Bell has been music director of London's Academy of St Martin in the Fields since 2011, where he's brought a new bite and vigour to the band's well-established aristocratic nobility.

Those qualities were firmly to the fore in his opening Mendelssohn Midsummer Night's Dream Over-

ture, along with an impeccable clarity to the ensemble's articulations, the players throwing themselves bodily into the music. But the ensemble wasn't always entirely together, not helped by Bell's gentle, floating direction from his violin bow.

There was the same concern in his closing Beethoven Pastoral Symphony, especially in its turbulent storm movement. It was a brisk, restless account, strong on rustic rawness but struggling to evoke Beethoven's humble piety in its surging finale.

In between, Bell stood out front for an effortlessly athletic Bruch Scottish Fantasy, deeply lyrical and full of fiddle brilliance and showmanship, but fastidiously articulated. It might not have provided many new insights, but it was captivating music-making all the same.

DAVID KETTLE