

RSNO Europe Tour round-up

Peter Oundjian kicked off (or almost) his tenure as the Royal Scottish National Orchestra's music director with an international tour – an energetic five-stop New Year trip to China just a few months into the role. And only weeks before his final season concert with the orchestra, he's led the players overseas again, this time on a more laid-back but no less whistlestop tour across Europe, covering five cities, four countries and five concerts in five days – and joined, as on previous tours, by violinist Nicola Benedetti.

First stop was Bregenz, Austria, where the super-modern concert hall backs onto the town's famous opera stage floating on the waters of Lake Constance (currently offering two gigantic hands ruffling a deck of oversize cards as a backdrop for *Carmen*). The hall's rather analytical acoustics, however, didn't exactly flatter the orchestra's playing at its opening concert (☆☆☆☆). Nor did they help with the slight feeling that Oundjian and the band were still settling into the tour repertoire.

They might have done with a little more fire and fury, but Oundjian's opening *Four Sea Interludes* from Britten's Peter Grimes were assertive and vibrant nonetheless – and the audience's rather tentative response was almost certainly down to Austrian listeners' unfamiliarity with this music. Beethoven's *Triple Concerto* was received far more warmly, however, in an energetic, finely detailed performance from Benedetti, joined by cellist Jan Vogler and pianist Martin Stadtfeld. Benedetti and Vogler made a natural pairing, ideally matched in their crisp, clean, characterful playing, but Stadtfeld seemed the odd man out, his somewhat mannered, effortful playing strangely at odds with the non-sensense lyricism of his colleagues. In the many phrases that Beethoven passes back and forth between his three soloists, for example, it struck a disconcerting note.

Oundjian completed the opening programme with a granitic Brahms *Fourth Symphony*, its outer movements delivered with gritted-teeth determination, though it



↑ The RSNO were joined by the violinist Nicola Benedetti, left

wasn't without humour in its boisterous scherzo. The audience lapped it up – as well as the exuberant Khachaturian and Scottish reels in the orchestra's duo of encores.

But what a difference a hall can make. Three hours down the motorway, the 1960s Congress in Alpine Innsbruck had a very wide, very shallow stage – meaning brass and percussion were flung out to the furthest reaches – but an exceptionally fine acoustic. On the programme (☆☆☆☆) was the same music as the previous evening, but it now felt ideally balanced, glowingly assured and bristling with detail – indeed, the players' unusual geographical spread only intensified the sense of many voices working as one. Oundjian and the musicians beautifully captured Britten's unsettling combination of surface exuberance and menace underneath, and an equally vibrant account of the Beethoven *Triple Concerto* drew a tumult of applause – and a thoughtful encore of the slow movement from Beethoven's early *Gassenhauer Trio* from the three soloists.

All change, however, with a hop over the border into Bergamo, Italy, whose Teatro Sociale is almost hidden among the narrow, winding streets of the hill-perched old town. This was a very different venue – an intimate opera house dating back to the start of the 19th century (its opening concert is reputed to have featured a young Gaetano Donizetti, a Bergamo native, as vocal soloist), with tiers of boxes overlooking the intimate stage – the modest size of which also required a slightly reduced orchestral line-up. The sound here was superbly bright and lively, if not overly

resonant – but an ideal setting, it turned out, for the evening's new programming (☆☆☆☆).

Bernstein's Plato-inspired *Serenade* has not been a regular feature of Benedetti's repertoire but it looks set to be in future (she brings it to the Edinburgh International Festival on 25 August) and it fits her like a glove. She excelled in its subtle picture painting, its brittle rhythmic intricacies and its sheer sense of exuberant joy, all conveyed with a simple, direct sense of authenticity. The orchestra was on punchy, incisive form, too, and it went down a storm with the audience. Oundjian's concluding Brahms *Fourth* was slightly brisker, slightly lighter than the previous two evenings but that was no bad thing – and the listeners went wild for his closing encore of reels: he did his best to keep the barely controlled frenzy between orchestra and clapping, stamping audience in some kind of order.

Virtually a day's drive away, Saturday evening saw the orchestra in the grand, cavernous space of Ljubljana's Cankarjev Dom cultural centre (☆☆☆☆) playing to a Slovenian crowd just as enthusiastic as the Italians, with blazing Britten, gutsy Beethoven and a Brahms *Fourth* that was nimbler and more sharply defined than ever – and the barely restrained exuberance of Oundjian's closing Scottish reels raised the crowd to their feet in appreciation.

The tour culminated in Dresden last night, at the music festival where soloist Jan Vogler is artistic director. It has been a deeply rewarding, revealing journey through cities and music, and a fittingly warm-hearted farewell foray for Peter Oundjian.

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