

Igor Levit performed minor miracles of balance, lending distinct character to each hand, showing that in 1801 Beethoven still owed a debt to the inherited tradition of Baroque trio sonatas.

When handing over the tune to Levit, Fischer proved to be a model accompanist, engaged in nothing so common as passagework. Their experience of playing the complete cycle of Beethoven violin sonatas in four European cities before performing it in London was evident in their firm and decisive unison flourishes, as well as in the off-beat dialogues where superficial serenity too often reigns. The second theme of the slow movement unfurled itself like a cat in the sun.

Beethoven's three op.30 sonatas showed a marked development from the 'Spring', but each in their own way. The cerebral intensity of no.1 found Fischer relatively self-contained (plucking rather than bowing the fourth variation of the finale) while Levit displayed more feline agility. No.2 was drawn tight and brought the fierce thrill of competition into the frame: semiquavers no longer neatly strung on a line but bunched like a fist. The exceptional vivacity of no.3 looked forward to the Eighth Symphony, with scraps of theme dealt between the two players like old hands at bridge. That Fischer played from memory throughout was remarkable, less as a feat than as an indication of the depth of her concentration, the complete absorption of herself into each sonata, and the finesse of her partnership with Levit. An outstanding evening.

PETER QUANTRILL

Edinburgh

David Kettle's pick of the finest string concerts at this year's festival

Last year might have had a distinct piano focus but in the 2016 Edinburgh International Festival's classical events, strings came far more prominently to the fore, with several high-profile soloists in the Usher Hall's orchestral concerts and a plethora of chamber ensembles among the Queen's Hall's morning recitals.

Among these was the Budapest-based **Kelemen Quartet** – one of a clutch of fine string quartets in the Queen's Hall programme – joined by the Austrian clarinettist Andreas Ottensamer (principal of the Berlin Philharmonic) on 16 August for the clarinet quintets of Mozart and Brahms. It might have felt like rather safe programming but they made the two pieces entirely their own. Their Mozart Quintet was supple and tender, gloriously focused in its velvety sound and with a few tasteful ornamentations from leader Barnabás Kelemen. The Brahms Quintet, on the other hand,

was not so much autumnal as decidedly desolate, turbulent in its split-second switches of emotion in the first movement and with a distinctive Magyar flavour to the churning tragedy of the final movement's variations. The Kelemen players dared to inject a hint of rawness to their playing, too, which made the two accounts thrillingly fresh.

Rather less fresh and spontaneous, however, were the performances by the **Emerson Quartet**, which offered a rich menu of Schubert, Haydn and Tchaikovsky on 19 August. These noble accounts were finely crafted but also felt rather overworked – not helped by the foursome retuning between virtually all the movements. Paul Watkins's abundant warmth, richness and enthusiasm contrasted with what sometimes felt like a coolness from the other three players. Nevertheless, all four suddenly burst into white-hot emotional life after the interval in Tchaikovsky's tragic Third Quartet, a real journey of a performance in which a few surprising lapses in intonation were more than made up for by heartfelt, passionate playing.

By way of utter contrast, the **Danish Quartet** closed the Queen's Hall recitals on 27 August with a concert displaying remarkable expressive freedom as well as a piercing clarity of intention – evident right from the start in the haiku-like concentration the players brought to their compatriot Per Nørgård's early *Quartetto breve*. They offered more Nordic music, too, with the world premiere of Norwegian Rolf Wallin's captivating *Swans Kissing*, whose minutely controlled glissandos, rising ever higher into Barber Adagio-style intensity, suddenly dissolved into a tapestry of filigree figurations and skittering motifs. The Danish foursome clearly believed in every second of the new work, injecting plenty of humour into its chaotic closing section, having built a remarkable emotional weight at its opening. The recital closed with a nimble, joyful Mozart Horn Quintet with Scottish Chamber Orchestra principal Alec Frank-Gemmill, and an explosive Beethoven 'Rasumovsky' Quartet in



The Kelemen Quartet: making Mozart and Brahms entirely their own

BALAZS BOROCZ/MIKAS STUDIO



The Danish Quartet: expressive freedom



Julian Rachlin: brisk and bracing in Bach



Steven Isserlis: complete Beethoven

E minor op.59 no.2, strongly projected and with plenty to say for itself. Throughout the concert there was an openness and sincerity to the Danish Quartet's playing, which made the event all the more compelling.

No less compelling – and equally open and sincere – was cellist **Steven Isserlis**, who, joined by fortepianist Robert Levin, took over the Queen's Hall for a complete survey of Beethoven's music for cello and keyboard across two recitals. The first of them (23 August) was a revelation, balancing intelligent programming with performances that revelled in the simple joy of making music. Isserlis gave crisp, focused accounts of variations on Handel and Mozart, and of Beethoven's own cello transcription of his Horn Sonata op.17, living every moment of the music with an intense, extrovert identification but never over-egging its expression. But he came into his own in two meatier sonatas. He looked hard for profundities in the early First Sonata op.5 no.1, and found them too; and his Third Sonata op.69 unfolded with unhurried grace – tender and thoughtful in the opening movement, energetic and exuberant in the bouncy finale.

Over in the Usher Hall, two violin soloists stood out among the orchestral programme – and for very different reasons. **Julian Rachlin** was in town (26 August) to play Bach's E major Concerto with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra under 89-year-old

Herbert Blomstedt – an unusual combination, perhaps, in these days of period specialisms, although the Gewandhaus's own history stretches as far back as Bach's time. Nevertheless, Rachlin's reading was convincingly brisk and bracing, with nicely judged swells in sound and energy, and judicious but effective splashes of vibrato bringing colour to quite a restrained slow movement. Despite a few passages where he dug into his G string rather over-emphatically, it was a lithe, sharply defined account, with Blomstedt needing to do little to direct the 13 strings plus harpsichord of the slimmed-down Gewandhaus forces.

The festival's string highlight, however, was Finn **Pekka Kuusisto's** (right) bracingly fresh account of Sibelius's Violin Concerto in a triumphant concert with the Minnesota Orchestra under Osmo Vänskä (23 August). There was already a sense of expectation before the event, since it was part of the Minneapolis band's first tour since the dark days of its lock-out in 2012–14, and Kuusisto's exceptionally clean, thoughtful Sibelius was just the performance to celebrate the orchestra's rebirth. He transformed it into a thoroughly modern, forward-looking work, fleet and glacial in its opening and disarmingly direct in its strongly defined finale, with a distinctive folk twang too. Unusually, he seemed to look the audience in the eye throughout the performance, as if to emphasise that he was doing it all for us. A few days earlier, Kuusisto had charmed BBC Proms listeners with an impromptu stand-up routine and audience-participation encore. He pulled a similar trick in Edinburgh but made a more serious point here, drawing parallels between the festival visitors flocking from all over the world with the plight of millions displaced by poverty and conflict, before launching into a heartbreaking folk tune with Vänskä on clarinet. It was a touching, profound, unforgettable moment.



ISSERLIS PHOTO: SATOSHI AOKI/AGI; KUUSISTO PHOTO: KAATO KAMU; RACHLIN PHOTO: JULIA WISELY; DANISH QUARTET PHOTO: CAROLINE BITTEN/COURT