

Westmorland Orchestra Concert Reviews

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Saturday 10th March 2018

Mozart Overture The Magic Flute
Dvorak Cello Concerto (Jack Bailey)
Elgar Enigma Variations
Jack Bailey - Cello, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

The Westmorland Orchestra presented a varied and colourful programme of symphonic works. The popular overture to the Magic Flute, first performed two months before Mozart's death in 1791, began the evening and was given a stylish performance with careful attention to the precision of the ensemble. The strings coped well with the fugal section and there was some expressive playing from the woodwind. Perhaps a little stilted at first, there was a good build up to the final climax.

Undoubtedly the highlight of the evening was the performance of the visiting young cellist Jack Bailey, a student from the Royal Northern college of Music. A multiple prize-winner including the Barbirolli Cello Prize, he has already had considerable experience as a soloist and has just returned from a national recital tour in Australia. In Saturday's performance of Dvorak's technically challenging cello concerto, first performed in 1895, he soon showed his mastery of the instrument in the opening movement. At best perhaps in the more lyrical passages, the adagio was quite captivating in its intensity of expression. The orchestra must be praised for its highly professional support showing great sensitivity in the dynamic contrasts and exhibiting a wealth of colour with some skilful playing from the woodwind and horns. The soloist was very much at home in the thrilling finale with its breathtaking coda and the audience was delighted by this remarkable and entertaining performance.

This was followed by Elgar's Enigma Variations, written in 1877. A set of 14 intended by the composer as musical portraits of his family and friends each identified by their initials. The conductor Richard Howarth kept a firm hand on the ever changing nuances and moods in this work. All the strings played superbly with an impressive warm sound throughout and the solo contributions from all sections were well executed and musically sensitive. This was a polished and musically convincing performance which deserved a greater accolade from the audience.

Congratulations to all for an enjoyable evening. Kendal is indeed fortunate to be home to an amateur orchestra of such style and positive achievement.

MARJORIE BRINNAND

Saturday 2nd December 2017

Debussy L'Après-Midi d'un Faune
Dukas The Sorcerer's Apprentice
Massenet Le Cid, Ballet Music
Berlioz Harold In Italy (Steven Burnard)
Steven Burnard – Viola, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is an unedited version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette
The Westmorland Orchestra chose an all-French programme for the opening concert of their 73rd season, reflecting the enthusiasm of conductor Richard Howarth for whom French has always been a particular favourite.

Perhaps the opening piece, Debussy's well-known and well-loved Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, would have been better placed later in the programme rather than as the opening item. After Philip Guar's lovely playing of the unaccompanied flute solo which opens the work, the performance overall suffered from some nervous moments and some questionable intonation. This said, any thought that this programme might be too taxing for the orchestra was immediately dispelled as the players launched into another well-known work, Dukas' The Sorcerer's Apprentice.

This is a colourful piece with a story attached to it. An apprentice sorcerer tries out his skills on a broomstick with disastrous results: the room becomes flooded as the broomstick becomes alive. The composer uses this ancient story as a means of building a musical picture of events. Each section of the orchestra gets a chance to shine as the story reaches its climax, and shine they did. There was no holding back in this exuberant performance.

Massenet's ballet music from his opera Le Cid was next on the programme. Again, this is colourful music and makes a lot of solo demands on sectional principals which showed once again what skilful players make up the Westmorland Orchestra.

Finally, after the interval, we heard less familiar music: Berlioz's suite of four movements for orchestra and viola known as Harold in Italy. The composer described this work not as a viola concerto but as 'a series of orchestral scenes in which the solo viola would be involved, to a greater or lesser extent, like an actual person'. The performance captured this idea well as the viola soloist, Steven Burnard, first positioned himself behind the orchestra entering into a musical conversation with the nearby harp. He then took centre stage for most of the rest of the work. His playing, –at times dazzling, at other times beautifully restrained, was masterly in its execution, as one would expect from the principal viola of a major orchestra. The orchestra, too, rose to the challenges of this very demanding score, playing with energy, sensitivity and beauty of tone in quieter passages, and playing throughout with the precision of a professional orchestra.

Clive Walkley

Saturday 20th May 2017

Respighi Pines of Rome
Rachmaninov Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini (Slava Sidorenko)
Brahms Symphony No 1
Slava Sidorenko - Piano, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is an unedited version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

It must have been very gratifying for the players of the Westmorland Orchestra to have an opportunity to perform the works originally planned for 2015 when the December storms forced a cancellation of the scheduled concert. The orchestra's May concert opened with the first of the postponed works: Respighi's colourful 'Pines of Rome'. This work is unashamedly programmatic. Each of its four movements has a descriptive title and the composer's clever orchestration enables us to imagine, in the first movement, children playing; in the second, we enter the catacombs; in the third we hear the nightingale in the stillness of night and, finally the march of the centurions on the Appian Way. The combined forces of the orchestra and Burneside Brass Band produced a huge volume of sound in this final movement. The large battery of percussion, of course, made significant but not 'over the top' contributions and the whole orchestra captured the essence of this evocative score.

Following the Respighi, we heard Rachmaninov's well-known 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini' in which the virtuoso piano part was played by the young Ukrainian pianist Slava Sidorenko. Slava is a multi-prize winner with a formidable technique. His performance of the technically-demanding solo part was breath-taking in its virtuosity and drew tremendous applause from the audience and the orchestra.

After the interval came the other postponed work, Brahms' mighty First Symphony. There were many impressive moments in this performance and throughout one could detect the care which had gone into the preparation. Conductor, Richard Howarth's precise direction ensured that the ensemble remained tight. In the last movement, for example, the strings' pizzicato was precise and firm, a quality sometimes lacking in an amateur performance. There was some lovely quiet string playing and again beautifully played solos from sectional principals; the brass entries in the chorale section of the last movement sounded very secure.

The orchestra seems to go from strength to strength and the playing in all three of the society's concerts this season has been consistently of a high standard.

Clive Walkley

Saturday 18th March 2017

Schumann Overture, Scherzo & Finale Overture
Hummel Trumpet Concerto (Gideon Brooks)
Beethoven Symphony No 3 in E Flat 'Eroica'
Gideon Brooks - Trumpet, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is an unedited version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

The Westmorland Orchestra opened the Mary Wakefield Festival last Saturday. Three works were on the programme: Schumann's Overture, Scherzo & Finale; Hummel's brilliant Trumpet Concerto and Beethoven's mighty 'Eroica' Symphony.

The Westmorland Orchestra achieves very high standards these days and if there is one word to describe the playing on this occasion, it must be the word 'precision'. Throughout the evening the fifty or so individuals played as one, and the over-all sound was that approaching a professional orchestra.

Schumann's Overture, Scherzo & Finale is not a well-known work. Although stylistically it bears many of the hallmarks of his symphonies, it does not have the same appeal as his truly symphonic works. However, the orchestra played it with conviction and confidence. Conductor, Richard Howarth, kept a firm grip on the ensemble through his clear, economical gestures, never allowing the rhythm to flag or the sense of pulse to be lost in this and the works which followed.

In Hummel's Trumpet Concert, the young soloist, Gideon Brooks, gave a confident and stylish performance. His strong, clear tone rang through the hall and instantly commanded our attention. His incisive attack and technical control was something that any brass players in the audience could not fail to admire.

After the interval came Beethoven's great 'Eroica' Symphony, originally dedicated to Napoleon – a dedication which was withdrawn when the composer learnt that Napoleon had declared himself Emperor. When reflecting on the playing, the word 'precision' again comes to mind and there were many fine moments. The players followed Beethoven's constantly-changing dynamic markings closely: the contrast between the violent fortissimos of the full orchestra followed by hushed woodwind chords and pianissimo tremolos in the upper strings in the centre section of the first movement was particularly impressive. The scherzo was taken at a safe speed and in the trio section the horns distinguished themselves in their exposed fanfare-like passages. The last movement's final chords brought the work to a triumphant and very impressive conclusion.

Clive Walkley

Saturday 3rd December 2016

Shostakovich Festive Overture
Dvorak Violin Concerto in A minor (Jennifer Pike)
Tchaikovsky Symphony No 4
Jennifer Pike - Violin, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is an unedited version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

The Westmorland Orchestra opened the society's 72nd season in fine style with a robustious performance of Shostakovich's Festive Overture written in 1954 when the composer was restored to favour following the death of Stalin. It is a bombastic, 'busy' but tuneful piece – an ideal concert opener, as its title suggests. The orchestra immediately impressed with the brass players blazing out the composer's fanfares with great assurance. There was no slackening of pace as the rest of the orchestra joined in with equal skill; indeed the degree of rhythmic precision was impressive throughout.

Following this, the distinguished young violinist Jennifer Pike, a former Young Musician of the year, joined the orchestra for a performance of Dvorak's Violin Concerto. Jennifer now has a world-wide reputation and, listening to her last Saturday evening, it is not difficult to see why. She has, of course, an immaculate technique; she produces a warm rich tone in melodic passages and dazzles when called upon to deliver virtuoso-style passage work. Her interaction with the orchestra was lovely. There was a slight problem of balance in the second movement when the woodwind are in counterpoint with the soloist playing very low in the violin's register, but this may have been a miscalculation on the composer's part rather the orchestra's failure to match the soloist.

After the interval, we heard Tchaikovsky's fourth Symphony. Again the brass players distinguished themselves in their opening fanfares and in many other passages in the work. In the slow movement, it was the woodwinds' turn to impress as sectional principals sang out Tchaikovsky's lyrical melodies, so full of melancholy. Then, in the third movement, a fast Scherzo, came the strings chance to shine; their rapid pizzicato playing was kept well under control by conductor, Richard Howarth. The whole symphony was brought to a triumphant conclusion, drawing an enthusiastic response from the audience.

It was heartening to see young students from local schools in the audience but, given extensive publicity, a world-class soloist and a very approachable programme, it was disheartening to see many empty seats which should have been filled. The Westmorland Orchestra reaches high standards and the commitment and dedication of the players deserves our support.

Saturday 14th May 2016

Humperdinck Hansel & Gretel Overture
Lalo Cello Concerto (Lucy Arch)
Gershwin American in Paris
Viennese items
Lucy Arch - cello, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is an unedited version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

The Westmorland Orchestra's summer concert is by tradition more light-weight than the winter programmes. In this concert, in place of the usual symphonic repertoire, the second half of the programme was given over to a succession of Viennese marches, polkas and waltzes by the Strauss family and their contemporaries, Karl Michael Ziehrer, and Franz Lehar. Audience participation was invited for Strauss' well-known Radetzky March and a group of young children (and two grown-ups) provided appropriate sound effects on their toy poppers in the Champagne Polka.

If this programme was designed to attract a larger audience than usual it sadly failed in its goal and the audience was disappointingly small. This was a pity because the playing throughout the evening was of a high standard, the result of the players' hard work in rehearsal and the leadership provided by conductor Richard Howarth.

The concert began with a lovely performance of Humperdinck's overture Hansel and Gretel. The four horns were in fine form as they played the introduction – a hymn which the composer gives to the two children later in the opera – and distinguished themselves throughout the evening.

Next came Edouard Lalo's tuneful Cello Concerto with the talented young cellist Lucy Arch as soloist. Lucy is studying for her postgraduate diploma at the Royal Northern College of Music. She is not a powerful player but she made a beautiful sound throughout (and later in a performance of Johan Strauss' Romance for Cello and Orchestra). She has a flawless technique and has a fine sense of phrasing; she is clearly a young artist to watch as her career develops.

Following the concerto we heard George Gershwin's exciting and colourful 'An American in Paris' in which the composer attempts to record the sounds, moods and sights of Paris which so captivated him on his visit to the city in 1928; even the Paris taxi horns find their place in the score. The players really let their hair down in this performance capturing the 'bluesy' feel and releasing all the energy of this colourful work; some excellent solo playing from the orchestra's sectional principals gave added pleasure.

Saturday 12th March 2016

Joint Concert with Youth Orchestra

Tchaikovsky Swan Lake Suite
Khachaturian Spartacus
Fudge Long Pursuit
Lanchberry Beatrix Potter Suite

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is an unedited version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

Both the Westmorland Orchestra and Westmorland Youth Orchestra are enterprising societies and this was fully demonstrated recently when both orchestras combined to form what is probably the largest orchestra ever to have performed in Kendal's Westmorland Hall. Around 120 players graced the stage and it was heart-warming to see youngsters in their teens sitting beside players of a much older vintage.

The concert arose out of an invitation from the senior orchestra to stage a joint concert and the commissioning of a new work for the two orchestras from local composer Roland Fudge, the conductor of the Westmorland Youth Orchestra. The result was one of the most exciting musical events (and there have been many) to be staged in Kendal in recent years. After separate performances, the two orchestras joined forces for Roland's new piece and a selection of John Lanchberry's ballet music written for the Beatrix Potter film of 1972.

There were many high points in this concert, one of which was the première of Roland's new work, 'The Long pursuit'. Roland explained that the inspiration for this piece came from his preoccupation with a poem about a chase. The idea of predator and prey was transformed musically into antiphonal interchanges between the two orchestras and a reconciliation allowing the two groups to end together harmoniously. The work was imaginative and cleverly scored, setting players in both orchestras some rhythmic challenges but, at the same time, recognising that less experienced players have certain technical limitations. It is a work which should be taken up by other amateur societies; there are very few works of this kind which allow young and not so young players to work side by side.

The performance of the Beatrix Potter ballet music was a visual spectacle, as well as an exciting auditory experience and a fine ending to a most enterprising musical venture; a model of integration and collaboration across the age divide.

Saturday 16th May 2015

Tchaikovsky Romeo & Juliet Overture
Mozart Piano Concerto no. 23 K488 (Michael McHale)
Grieg Norwegian Dances
Harty Irish Symphony
Michael McHale - piano, conductor Sinead Hayes

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is an unedited version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

The recent concert by the Westmorland Orchestra brought the orchestra's 70th season to a fitting end. The evening had a distinctive Irish feel: an Irish conductor, Sinead Hayes, a Belfast-born piano soloist, Michael McHale, and 'An Irish Symphony' (1904) by Sir Hamilton Harty, whose roots were in Northern Ireland.

The concert began with Tchaikovsky's dramatic Fantasy Overture 'Romeo and Juliet'. There were some thrilling moments in this performance, marred only by some lapses of ensemble and some uncharacteristic out of tune playing towards the end from the normally reliable and excellent woodwind section. In Mozart's lovely Piano Concerto, K.488, which followed, Michael McHale gave a careful, clean reading; his playing was sensitive and rhythmically well controlled.

After the interval came three of Grieg's well-known Norwegian Dances. These were delightfully played with some notable contributions from principals in the wind department. Finally, the performance of Harty's 'Irish Symphony', colourfully orchestrated as one might expect from a former long-standing conductor of the Hallé Orchestra, and stuffed full of Irish folk melodies, making great demands at various points on individual soloist from all sections of the orchestra. Guest conductor, Sinead Hayes, directed with clarity, energy and obvious enthusiasm and the orchestra responded with reciprocal enthusiasm and panache.

Congratulations to all for another season of fine music-making!

Saturday 14th March 2015

Mendelssohn Hebrides Overture
Brahms 2nd piano concerto (Ian Buckle)
Beethoven 7th Symphony
Ian Buckle - piano, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

This is the full version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

The excellent concert presented by the Westmorland Orchestra as part of the Westmorland Music Festival deserved to be better supported. Given the fact that the three works on the programme – by Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn – were from the mainstream orchestral repertoire, the number of empty seats in the Westmorland Hall was disappointing.

The concert began with a confident performance of Mendelssohn's stormy Hebrides Overture. The players captured the brooding atmosphere of the work very effectively with the lower strings producing a rich tone in their melodic line; the upper strings, however, sounded a little weak in comparison. Throughout, the ensemble playing was tight with lovely expressive playing in the quieter sections and impressive climaxes.

In Brahms Piano Concert No.2, the players were joined by soloist, Ian Buckle. This is a huge work, demanding great strength from the soloist who needs to balance his part with the sound of a full orchestra playing fortissimo at times. Ian Buckle showed that he could do this but his playing revealed weakness in the state of the piano in the Westmorland Hall which clearly needs some attention in the upper register; the sound is hard and brittle suggesting perhaps that the hammers are worn.

There were some lovely contributions from individual members of the orchestra: horn and woodwind soloists stood out and Vivienne Pooley's solo cello melody at the opening of the slow movement was beautifully played, earning her an accolade from conductor, Richard Howarth. He obtained some impressive pianissimo playing by the string section in this movement.

Finally came Beethoven's seventh symphony, once described by Belioz as 'the apotheosis of the dance' because of the strongly marked rhythms which are such a strong characteristic of this work, even in the slow movement. The energy and volume of sound required makes this a very demanding work for an orchestra and it is to the great credit of players and conductor that the Westmorland achieved this. There were some minor blemishes in tuning from time to time, but these did not detract from the overall performance which was energetic yet disciplined. Among particular highlights were, the sustained crescendo at the beginning of the slow movement, the many woodwind solo passages, so expertly played, and the energy released in the finale.

Saturday 6th December 2014

Dvorak In Nature's Realm
Mozart Oboe Concerto (Rachael Clegg)
Shostakovitch 10th Symphony
Rachael Clegg - Oboe, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Lakes Leisure Kendal

This is a longer version of the review published in the Westmorland Gazette

This year, the Westmorland Orchestra celebrates its 70th concert season, and so it was disappointing to find that, after much advance publicity, the Kendal Leisure Centre was only a little over half full for the orchestra's adventurous programme. The Westmorland has made a significant contribution to the cultural life of South Lakeland over the years and deserves much better support. Perhaps concertgoers were put off by the name of Shostakovich whose tenth Symphony formed the backbone of the programme.

This was a concert of two halves in more senses than one. Dvorak's evocation of the Bohemian countryside – his overture 'In Nature's Realm' – which opened the concert was marred by some dubious intonation and insecure entries. In Mozart's Oboe Concerto which followed, Rachel Clegg was a fine soloist. Her vast professional experience as soloist and orchestral player shone through in her lovely tone and immaculate phrasing. Unfortunately, in spite of reduced forces in the string department, the orchestra's accompaniment sounded heavy at times and lacked the soloist's subtlety of phrasing.

But a transformation seemed to take place in the second half of the concert: the performance of the Shostakovich symphony, written under the shadow of the Stalinist regime, was electrifying. There was no sign of the earlier insecurities and the orchestra worked like a huge machine to release the terrifying violence embedded in this masterpiece. The strings produced a vibrant, strong tone and, as usual, the Westmorland's excellent woodwind section played with distinction, aided by the full weight of the brass and a confident percussion section.

Conductor, players and committee deserve our thanks for having the courage (and the ability) to give us the chance to hear this mighty work by one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century.

Saturday 17th May 2014

Mendelssohn Midsummer Night's Dream
Saint-Saens cello concerto (Hannah Roberts)
Smetana Vltava
Dvorak Czech Suite
Ravel Bolero
Hannah Roberts - cello, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Lakes Leisure Kendal

published in the Westmorland Gazette

The Westmorland Orchestra's 69th season ended with a concert in the Westmorland Hall on Saturday 17th May. The programme featured five well-known works by Mendelssohn, Saint-Saëns, Smetana, Dvořák and Ravel.

Mendelssohn's youthful Midsummer Night's Dream Overture opened the programme. It took some time for the upper strings to establish unanimity in the opening fairy theme but they grew in confidence on each repetition.

After the overture, Hannah Roberts joined the orchestra in a fine performance of Saint-Saëns' Cello Concerto in A minor. Playing on a Stradivarius instrument, she captured the lyrical warmth of the central section of the piece beautifully and handled the more bravura sections with consummate skill.

Smetana's colourful tone poem 'Vltava', described in Barry Sharkey's excellent programme notes as a 'watery landscape painting in music', gave each section of the orchestra a chance to shine, and shine they did. The opening swirling phrases on flutes and clarinets, symbolizing the source of the river in its two streams, interlocked beautifully and the string section clearly relished the big tune which depicts the river Vltava as it flows through the Bohemian landscape.

The concert ended with Ravel's ever-popular Bolero. The sectional principals excelled themselves in their confident presentation of Ravel's sinuous melody which dominates the work and the side drummer maintained a steady rhythm throughout. Not surprisingly, the performance drew an enthusiastic response from the audience.

The orchestra, under the direction of Richard Howarth, seems to go from strength to strength and it is good to see that next season's concert programme is already available.

Saturday 15th March 2014

Rimsky-Korsakov May Night
Tchaikovsky violin concerto (Jiafeng Chen)
Tchaikovsky 5th Symphony
Jiafeng Chen - violin, conductor Richard Howarth

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Lakes Leisure Kendal

published in edited form in the Westmorland Gazette

There was much to enjoy in the Westmorland Orchestra's recent concert for lovers of Russian romantic music. Stirring melodies, sumptuous harmonies, rich texture were there in abundance in music by Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky.

The opening item, Rimsky-Korsakov's operatic overture 'May Night', was rather disappointing. It did not seem to have the sparkle that one normally associates with this composer's music; or perhaps the orchestra had not warmed up. Whatever, the reason, it received a rather luke-warm reception.

But then the young Chinese violinist Jiafeng Chen joined the orchestra for a performance of Tchaikovsky's famous Violin Concerto and the atmosphere changed. The audience was stunned by his warm tone, dazzling technique and the wonderful expressive qualities of his playing which drew thunderous applause. This was a fine performance, with the orchestra providing a firm support for the soloist. He made no concessions to amateur players when it came to matter of tempi: the finale particularly had everyone on the edge of their seats!

The programme concluded with Tchaikovsky weighty 5th Symphony. There were some thrilling moments here when the whole orchestra blazed forth with the composer's great climaxes. But there were quieter moments when the players of the orchestra's excellent woodwind section and the principal horn excelled themselves as they indulged in the composer's many fine melodies which are such a feature of this work.

Saturday 7th December 2013

Walton 'Orb & Sceptre'
Vaughan Williams Toward the Unknown Region
Elgar Wand of Youth Suite 2
Berlioz Symphonie Fantastique
Conductors Richard Howarth & Ian Thompson

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Lakes Leisure Kendal

published in the Westmorland Gazette

'Entente Cordiale' was the phrase used by conductor, Richard Howarth, to describe the Westmorland Orchestra's recent concert programme in which we heard three works by British composers, Walton, Vaughan Williams and Elgar before moving across the channel for Berlioz's dramatic Symphonie fantastique.

The orchestra took some time to settle down. The brass tended to overpower the strings in Walton's rousing coronation overture, 'Orb and Sceptre', and there were some rhythmic inaccuracies. But confidence was restored when Kendal South Choir joined the orchestra for a performance of Vaughan Williams' 'Toward the Unknown Region', ably directed by Ian Thompson, the choir's director. The singers sounded confident with the tenors in particular producing some lovely tone.

Richard Howarth returned to the platform for a performance of Elgar's Wand of Youth Suite No. 2, based on tunes the composer wrote in childhood. In this and Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique the players impressed by their ability to rise to the technical and musical challenges both works presented. The strings produced a firm sound without any sign of nervousness; the woodwind principals were outstanding in their many solo passages; the brass added the right amount of weight to the climaxes, while the percussion section provided atmosphere and colour.

Well done to all for a fine concert!