

Westmorland Orchestra Concert Reviews

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Saturday 21st May 2022

Hindemith – Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes by Carl Maria Weber
Mozart - Clarinet Concerto in A (Jack Horrocks)
Brahms –Symphony No 2

Jack Horrocks Clarinet, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert - Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

Players and conductor were given a warm welcome as they assembled for the last concert in the current season. The impact of Covid presented the orchestra with some difficulties in the March concert with a much depleted violin section, but the strings on this occasion were at full strength resulting in a much better balance between this section and the winds.

After the playing of National Anthem the concert got off to a firm start with Hindemith's colourful Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes by Carl Maria Weber. Hindemith's music is very much out of fashion at the moment and so it was good to be able to hear a live performance of one of the composer's best-known compositions. The work is not without its technical challenges but it was obvious that much work had gone into the preparation and there was some very impressive playing from all sections of the orchestra.

The strong percussion section (seven players in all) set the performance ablaze in the opening allegro and added colour throughout the remaining movements. Richard Howarth's firm direction and carefully chosen tempi captured the spirit of each of the four movements in this highly colourful work.

Clarinet soloist, Jack Horrocks, gave a fine performance of Mozart's famous Clarinet Concerto which followed the Hindemith. His tone was so even throughout the instrument's register and in the Adagio second movement he produced a lovely legato line. The orchestra's responded with a sympathetic accompaniment, never overwhelming the solo part. The bass line was a little on the heavy side at times and perhaps a reduction in the number of cellists would have helped to balance the upper strings. However, that said, this was a stylish performance which captured the spirit of this glorious work.

Brahms' genial Second Symphony concluded the concert. Again, one felt that the work had been carefully prepared and there was much to admire in the performance. The opening of the first movement, where the thematic material is passed from lower strings to horns and then to woodwinds, set the mood perfectly and thereafter the playing sounded confident and controlled. Cellos and violas shaped the second main theme of the first movement very effectively and the cellos sang through the opening theme of the slow movement with confidence. Brahms makes big demands on woodwind and horns in this work, demanding careful listening and tuning on behalf of the players, and precise ensemble playing. There many sensitive solos and the horn section in particular sounded confident in their many exposed passages.

This concert was a very satisfactory end to the orchestra's season, one that must have caused players and organising committee some concerns with the shadow of Covid hanging over all our lives. Again, one hopes that next season will bring back a larger audience to support the dedication and enthusiasm of the fine local players who work tirelessly to bring great music to Kendal.

Clive Walkley

Saturday 26th Mar 2022

Berlioz – Overture Roman Carnival
Rimsky-Korsakov - Trombone Concerto (Ellena Newton)
Fredrik Holm - Equilibrium (New Commission)
Dvorak - Symphony No 9 "From The New World"

Ellena Newton Trombone, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert - Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

[The concert opened with a stirring playing of the Ukraine National Anthem; the spontaneous upstanding audience was deeply touching.]

The recent concert by the orchestra was a brave venture and an enterprising one. Brave because the orchestra was heavily hit by the effects of covid in the final stages of preparation resulting in the absence of several violinists and replacement wind players: enterprising in the commissioning of a new work by a local composer. Yes, the reduced number of players in the violin sections did have a negative impact but did not diminish the enthusiasm of the players who rose to the challenge admirably.

The concert opened with Berlioz's energetic, colourful overture **Roman Carnival**. Heavily scored in favour of the brass section, the players were perhaps a little over-enthusiastic in their fanfares but there were some gentler moments as the Cor Anglais and strings sang out the composer's lovely melodic lines. The percussion department too clearly enjoyed adding colour and weight to the climaxes and overall the performance released the unbridled energy required to give us a carnival atmosphere.

Rimsky-Korsakov's Trombone Concerto was given a very confident performance by the young soloist Ellena Newton. Her tone throughout was smooth and even, and she met the technical challenges of the cadenza section with great assurance.

Next came the première performance of new work, **Equilibrium**, written by Fredrik Holm, a local composer (and conductor of the Westmorland Youth Orchestra) in memory of Jonty Somervell, a member of the Westmorland Orchestra for 65 years. Written in three movements for full orchestra, it revealed the composer's command of orchestration and his ability to develop his ideas over a long time span. As Jonty was a viola player, the viola section figured prominently, especially in the second movement where the section rose to prominence. There were many arresting ideas in this work which deserves to be taken up by other orchestras.

Perhaps the performance of Dvorak's **Symphony from the New World** presented the orchestra with its greatest challenge of the evening. It is a work known and loved by so many music lovers, full of memorable melodies and great climaxes and any inadequacies in the playing are easily noticeable. There were moments when one felt the need for a stronger upper string line but what the first violins lacked in numbers they made up for by the quality of their playing. After a shaky start in the slow movement with some insecure tuning in the opening wind chords Dvorak's lovely Cor Anglais solo was beautifully played by Rachel Malloch; other members of the wind department distinguished themselves in the prominent solos given to them throughout the work. The final climax in the last movement brought the concert to a joyful conclusion.

Well done to all in overcoming the challenges set by the current pandemic! The enterprise shown by the orchestra was worthy of greater support by all local music lovers.

Clive Walkley

Sunday 12th Dec 2021

Coleridge-Taylor Christmas Overture
Borodin In the Steppes of Central Asia
Bruch Violin Concerto No.1
Rossini Overture The Barber of Seville
Lane Three Christmas Pictures
Bizet Selection from Carmen
Anderson Christmas Festival

Pamela Redman Violin, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert - Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

There was a palpable sense of excitement in the air at the concert on Sunday December 12 when conductor Richard Howarth bounded onto the platform and announced triumphantly 'We're back!' This was the orchestra's return concert after an absence of nearly two years; the last concert took place in March 2020 just two days before lockdown.

The decision to arrange a concert for a Sunday afternoon was a good one and it was so encouraging to see young children in the audience, perhaps brought by grandparents who don't like driving on a dark winter's night. The inclusion of shorter pieces – some in a lighter vein with colourful orchestrations and overtly 'Christmassy' in flavour – suited the occasion well and drew enthusiastic response from an appreciative audience, especially the children.

Although many of the pieces on the programme could be classed as light music, this does not mean that they are any easier to play technically; in fact, they make heavy demands, particularly on members of the woodwind department. There were many taxing solo passages for each player; horns and trumpets too had important solo roles and in spite of occasional lapses of intonation all the wind players excelled themselves. The upper strings sounded confident as they negotiated some tricky passagework; the percussion department, of course, added colour and zest particularly in works like Bizet's 'Carmen' Suites and Leroy Anderson's 'Christmas Festival' and 'Sleigh Ride'.

Undoubtedly, one of the highlights of the concert was Pamela Redman's performance of Max Bruch's well-known Violin Concerto. Her first quiet entry, so beautifully shaped, set the stage for what was to come. The slow movement in particular – probably everyone's favourite passage in this work – had a feeling of stillness and calm as the lovely legato melodic lines unfolded with great tonal beauty. The final movement (*Allegro energetico*) was played with great panache. The orchestra gave the right degree of support throughout, never overwhelming the solo violin.

The concert must have given great encouragement to all the players who for months earlier in the year were denied the pleasure of making music together and it certainly put the audience in a festive mood.

Clive Walkley

Saturday 14th Mar 2020

Beethoven Prometheus Overture and Ballet Music Selection
Mozart Piano Concerto No24 in C minor K491
Mendelssohn Symphony No4 in A Op 90

Serene Koh Piano, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert – Victoria Hall, Grange-over-Sands

It was pleasing to see a near capacity audience at the Westmorland Orchestra's recent concert in the Victoria Hall, Grange-over-Sands. On a damp evening and with the ever-growing threat of the coronavirus, the orchestra must have been heartened to be welcomed by such a large gathering. The downside of the move from the orchestra's usual venue, Kendal's Westmorland Hall, to a much smaller hall, however, was the less than ideal acoustic for an orchestra of 50 plus players. The sound from the wind department (brass especially) was overwhelming at times and did have an adverse impact on the performance. That said, there was much to admire in the playing of the three fine works on the programme.

The concert opened with the Overture and selected movements from Beethoven's music for the ballet 'The Creatures of Prometheus'. This got off to a confident start and immediately it was obvious that the orchestra had been well prepared for the performance. The strings deftly negotiated their rapid passage work and the woodwinds demonstrated a lightness of touch in their solo passages. The demanding duet for bass horn and oboe was confidently delivered by sectional principals, Ruth Watton and Nigel Atkinson.

The young Singaporean pianist, and multiple prize winner, Serene Koh was the soloist in Mozart's C minor Piano Concerto K491. Martin Roscoe, the Westmorland Orchestra's President, described her as 'an ideal soloist' for this concerto, and so it turned out. Her playing had the clarity which Mozart's music demands. She produced a beautiful tone in the many quiet solos passages with immaculate phrasing and beautifully sustained legato lines. Her dazzling technique enabled her to negotiate Mozart's rapid passage work, including the difficult cadenza, with ease. Sadly, the work's opening was marred by some uncertain intonation in the strings and wind and throughout one was aware of the heavy bass line of the orchestra's eight cellos and four double basses.

After the interval came Mendelssohn's 'Italian' Symphony. This produced some of the best playing of the evening. The performance had energy and conductor, Richard Howarth, drove on the outer movements with great momentum, never allowing the tempo to flag. There was a good balance in the Andante movement between the woodwind hymn-like melodic line and string marching accompaniment. In the third movement the two horn players distinguished themselves in their horn calls with more impressive playing from the woodwind section. The final exhilarating Saltarello proved a fitting end to a concert which must have brought cheer to many.

Clive Walkley

Sunday 8th Dec 2019

Prokofiev Lieutenant Kije Suite
Glazunov Violin Concerto in A minor
Dvorak Prague Waltzes B.99
De Falla Ritual Fire Dance from El amor brujo
Ernest Tomlinson Suite of English Dances
Herold arr Lanchberry Clog Dance from La Fille Mal Gardée
Johann Strauss II Polka, Thunder & Lightning
Tchaikovsky Swan Lake Finale

Joo Yeon Sir Violin, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert - Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

It was good to hear the players of the Westmorland Orchestra on such good form for their recent concert in Kendal Leisure Centre. Billed as a Christmas concert for the whole family, it was encouraging to see so many young children in the audience. Apart from the one serious solo item, the programme consisted of short, tuneful works full of captivating rhythms and orchestral colour with lots of percussion – all the ingredients necessary to attract children (and perhaps grown-ups too!).

Prokofiev's orchestral suite Lieutenant Kije opened the concert. The first movement entitled, 'The Birth of Kije' begins with an off-stage fanfare played by a solo cornet and then more military fanfares, well played by the full brass section on stage. What a good piece to begin a concert this is. The programmatic nature of the five movements makes for relatively easy listening; at the same time one can admire Prokofiev's skill as an orchestrator. Film music the suite may be, but it is skillfully crafted by a great master of orchestration.

After the opening suite, the orchestra was joined by the young, hugely-talented Korean-born British violinist Joo Yeon Sir to play Glazunov's Violin Concerto. Any young violinists in the audience – and older ones too – could not fail to be impressed by her breath-taking virtuosity. Her tone is rich and she shapes melodic lines so beautifully; but it was probably the sheer brilliance of her playing of rapid passage work that drew such enthusiastic applause from the audience. She responded with an unaccompanied encore by Fritz Kreisler, a violinist renowned for his virtuosity, in which she demonstrated complete mastery of all the different techniques that are required of a virtuoso violinist.

A charming suite of English Folk-Dances arranged by the Lancashire composer, Ernest Tomlinson, noted for his contribution to the light music repertoire, introduced the second half of the concert. These and the remaining works in the programme (Herold's Clog Dance, Johann Strauss' Thunder and Lightning Polka and the finale from Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake Ballet Suite) were well played and suited the orchestra, giving each section a chance to shine. Conductor Richard Howarth's careful direction, and his insistence on high standards, certainly brought out the best in the orchestra on this occasion.

This family friendly afternoon concert was a new venture for the Westmorland and one to be applauded. Light-weight the programme may have been, but there was no lowering of standards in the playing and, above all, it had a sense of fun.

Clive Walkley

Saturday 18th May 2019

Schubert Symphony No 6 in C
Bruch Bruch Moeran Wythorne's Shadow
Brahms Serenade No 1 in D

Lily Whitehurst Violin, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

The Westmorland Orchestra's latest concert got off to a fine start as the whole orchestra launched into Schubert's tuneful sixth symphony: what better way to start a concert than with everyone joining in the two loud chords which open this work – a great confidence booster! The confident opening was a sign of things to come. So much of this symphony is dominated by Schubert's lovely woodwind writing and here the Westmorland's woodwind section excelled. The flutes in particular have an important role and their playing sparkled throughout the work; they were ably backed up by their colleagues. Conductor, Richard Howarth, paced the work at a safe speed which resulted in a very satisfying and enjoyable performance. Although not one of Schubert's most difficult symphonies, the work is not without its challenges but is not beyond the capabilities of a good amateur orchestra like the Westmorland.

Following the Schubert, Lily Whitehurst was the violin soloist in Max Bruch's Romance in A, Op. 42. Lily is in her final year as an advanced student at the Royal Northern College of Music where she has won many awards. She is no stranger on the professional orchestral scene and has recently been appointed to a place in the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. Her playing is beautifully lyrical. Occasionally she was overwhelmed by the orchestra but overall this did not diminish the quality of the performance. After the Bruch she showed another side to her artistic personality as she romped effortlessly through Manuel de Falla's rhythmically exciting Spanish Dance. The clicking of the castanets brought the necessary Spanish quality to the performance, bringing the first half of the concert to a very satisfying close.

After the interval, we heard Brahms lengthy first Serenade for orchestra, written when he was still a relatively unknown composer. The work is in six movements and contains many hallmarks of his later, mature style. But it is thickly scored in places and there were times when the strings were overwhelmed by the wind department. This is not necessarily a criticism of the string section; the players produced a good firm sound, but Brahms' orchestral music demands weight in this section. Again the wind players excelled themselves, particularly in the fifth movement when they came into prominence. I'm sure the orchestra would welcome the addition of more string players to swell the ranks!

Sadly, there were many empty seats in the hall and the enthusiasm and skill of the players, many of whom travel long distances to be part of the orchestra, deserve much better support.

Clive Walkley

Saturday 23rd March 2019

Mendelssohn Symphony No 5: The Reformation
Berlioz Te Deum

Christopher Steele Tenor, Conductor Richard Howarth., Chorus Master Ian Jones

Westmorland Orchestra Concert and Cumbria Festival Chorus
Kendal Parish Church

The 2019 Mary Wakefield Festival got off to a fine start with a concert in Kendal Parish Church on Saturday 23 March given by the combined forces of the Westmorland Orchestra and Cumbria Festival Chorus under the direction of Richard Howarth. The programme consisted of two works: Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 5 known as 'The Reformation' and Berlioz's Te Deum. This work demands large forces and fortunately a 120-strong chorus was available to do it justice, backed up by a full orchestra and Kendal Parish Church's powerful organ.

The two works complimented each other and were a good choice for a festive occasion. Mendelssohn's 'Reformation' Symphony was originally written for a celebratory event and an air of triumphalism is never far away. The Te Deum, of course, is a great hymn of praise and Berlioz's setting, conceived on a vast scale, makes it highly suitable for an occasion like the Mary Wakefield Festival.

The orchestra gave a very creditable performance of Mendelssohn's symphony. The wind section have much to do in this work and they distinguished themselves in the richly scored opening section of the first movement, ably assisted by the lower strings. The dance-like second movement was well controlled with notable ensemble and solo contributions for sectional principals; again the lower strings made a lovely sound as they sang out the melodic line in the central section. In the last movement, Mendelssohn makes much use of one of the great Lutheran hymns, *Ein' feste Burg*, and this blazed out triumphantly as the work came to a close.

After the interval, the choir – expertly trained by Ian Jones – joined the orchestra in a fine performance of the Berlioz. The opening five chords were immediately arresting: a loud chord from the orchestra is immediately followed by another on the organ at the back of the church, as Berlioz intended; the process is then repeated before the chorus enters and the great hymn of praise begins. Much of this work is intended to be performed loudly but one never got the impression that the singers were overstretching themselves. There are quieter sections, sometimes for unaccompanied choir, and these were managed well. Organist, Andy Plowman, produced some lovely sounds from the organ and the work's section for solo tenor was beautifully sung by Lancaster-based tenor Christopher Steele. He has a powerful voice of real quality and sang with sensitivity and a sense of drama.

This concert was a fine example of local music-making at its very best and it was good to see an almost capacity audience supporting it. Many congratulations to all involved!

Clive Walkley

Saturday 1st December 2018

Butterworth A Shropshire Lad
Vaughan Williams Songs of Travel (Christopher Faulkner)
Moeran Wythorne's Shadow
Arthur Benjamin Jamaican Rumba
Beethoven Symphony No 6 in F Op 68 'Pastoral'

Christopher Faulkner Baritone, conductor Richard Howarth.

Westmorland Orchestra Concert
Westmorland Hall, Kendal Leisure Centre

'Commemoration and Hope' was the title of the Westmorland Orchestra latest concert in the Westmorland Hall on Saturday 1st December. Commemoration came in the form of performances of music by composers who served in the First World War: Hope was reflected in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony with its expression of joy in the natural world - the personal experience of the composer as he found solace in nature. This was an imaginative piece of programme planning which worked well, although unfortunately not attracting the large audience the orchestra hoped for and deserved.

The concert began with George Butterworth's lovely Rhapsody, 'A Shropshire Lad'. The performance got off to rather uncertain start but recovered to reveal the beauty of Butterworth's evocative description of the English countryside.

Breaking away from the usual pattern of an instrumental soloist joining the orchestra for a concerto, the committee had taken the brave decision to invite a vocalist, baritone Christopher Faulkner, to perform Vaughan Williams' 'Songs of Travel'. Christopher has a fine baritone voice, even throughout his range, and gave a good account of the nine settings of texts by R. L. Stevenson. There were times when he was overwhelmed by the orchestra, but given Vaughan Williams' thick scoring, this was perhaps inevitable. (The songs are normally heard with piano accompaniment). It would have been helpful to have had the texts of the songs in the programme.

Next came a little-known piece by E. J. Moeran, 'Whythorne's Shadow', based on a song by the Elizabethan composer, Thomas Whythorne. Moeran was injured in 1917 and wrote the piece many years later in between two world wars. This charming serenade was well played by the orchestra. Closing the first half of the programme, and in complete contrast to what had gone before we heard Arthur Benjamin's famous 'Jamaican Rumba'. The rhythmic momentum was maintained splendidly by pianist, Alex Phillips-Yates, aided by the percussion section.

The second half of the programme was given over entirely to a performance of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. Conductor, Richard Howarth, kept tight control of the string section who carry much of the thematic material in the first movement. In the second movement subtitled 'scene by the brook' the principal woodwind players distinguished themselves in the bird calls which Beethoven writes into the score. The thunderstorm which arrives half way was particularly impressive and in the final movement, 'Shepherds' Hymn of Thanksgiving after the Storm', the woodwind section again made a significant contribution.

Again, it was heart-warming to see and hear the dedication of the players who make up the Westmorland. The orchestra plays an important role in the world of music in South Lakeland.
Clive Walkley

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

3 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 Gruar'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 Lanchbery'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)
Shostakovich 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, Dvorák 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!