

The Industrious Brandenburg State Play Schnyder, Mendelssohn and Bruckner's 4th in Switzerland

January 18, 2012

Switzerland **Switzerland Schnyder, Mendelssohn, Bruckner**: Brandenburg State Orchestra, Frankfurt/Oder, Howard Griffiths (conductor), Julian Rachlin (violin), Daniel Schnyder (saxophone), Tonhalle Zurich, 17.1.2011 (JR)



Schnyder: Sphinx, for tenor saxophone und orchestra
Mendelssohn: Violin Concerto
Bruckner: Symphony No. 4

Frankfurt/Oder, as those with a knowledge of German geography will know, should not be confused with Frankfurt/Main and the Brandenburg Symphony Orchestra are not to be confused with the Berlin Philharmonic, even though only 60 miles apart. Frankfurt/Oder is a large town on the banks of the Oder river, the eastern German frontier to Poland, and for many decades it was located in the German Democratic Republic. Its musicians still predominantly hail from Eastern Germany.

Howard Griffiths, not a name well known by British music lovers (unless they live in Switzerland, though he has in the past conducted the RPO and the London Mozart Players) has been living in Switzerland since 1981, was Principal Conductor of the well-regarded Zurich Chamber Orchestra for ten years (until 2006) and has now been General Music Director of the Brandenburgers since 2007. This was his chance to bring his symphony orchestra to his adopted home country and show his skills as and interpreter of a heavyweight work.



Howard Griffiths – photo courtesy of Zurich Tonhalle

The concert opened with a curious world première. The Swiss composer and

saxophonist Daniel Schnyder was born in Zurich but has been living for some time in New York. His piece *Sphinx* was commissioned by Migros, a Swiss retail giant, who sponsored this entire concert, in an annual series of concerts. They aim to promote Swiss composers and artists to reach a wider audience. (The same concert now tours to St. Gall, Geneva and Basle). *Sphinx*, a piece for tenor saxophone und orchestra, was inspired – as its name suggests – by the enigmatic Egyptian statue and the aura it emits. *Sphinx* turned out to be a cross-over tonal piece fusing jazz and classical, foot tapping at times and ending with a noisy Latin flourish. The piece was principally a showcase for Schnyder's talents as jazz saxophonist; one was reminded what unusual and – it has to be said – somewhat unpleasant noises the tenor sax can make. The orchestra accompanied with restraint, perhaps too much so at the end where Dudamel and the Venezuelans would have gone hell for leather.

Julian Rachlin is, of course, a well-known name. The virtuoso passages of Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* provided plenty of opportunities for Rachlin to show off his breath-taking and nonchalant technique, but was there sufficient lyricism in the softer passages? Rachlin made the whole work sound so effortless, and he is clearly aware of his prodigious talent. Griffiths and his orchestra were sensitive accompanists throughout. By way of an encore, Rachlin held the audience spell-bound with a gentle Bach *Sarabande*.

Bruckner's *Fourth* is probably the easiest of his symphonies to fathom and hard, even for the many

(misguided) who find Bruckner monotonous, to dislike. Griffiths does not naturally fall into the hallowed circle of Bruckner interpreters such as Haitink, Wand, Karajan or Jochum but on this evening's evidence he certainly showed an understanding and empathy for the music, its structure (many say architecture) and its course. Griffiths mostly maintained the work's rhythmic pulse and did not deviate from steady tempi. Griffiths and his orchestra clearly relished the frequent brass outbursts and chorales. Special mention must go to the Principal Horn player, though he and his colleagues did not have a particularly lucky night with split notes, the principal flautist, the whole cello section and the timpanist. Strings and woodwind were however the weakest link in the orchestra, too often sounding weedy and raw. Despite plenty of evident rehearsal, there were still too many rough edges and stray notes and occasionally a lack of ensemble: the orchestra is visibly industrious and hopefully Griffiths will iron out some of these failings before the next concerts in this series.

John Rhodes

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