

Philharmonia on Tour in Switzerland Impress with First-Rate Eroica.



Switzerland **Dubugnon, Brahms and Beethoven:** Philharmonia Orchestra, Arabella Steinbacher (violin) Esa-Pekka Salonen (conductor), Tonhalle Zurich 27.10.15 (JR)**Dubugnon:** Caprice for Orchestra No. 1
Brahms: Violin concerto
Beethoven: Symphony No. 3

The Philharmonia are currently on a lightning tour of Swiss cities courtesy of Swiss grocery retailer Migros (Migros Kulturprozent Classics) and I caught their concert at the Tonhalle in Zurich.

Swiss composer Richard Dubugnon has been commissioned to write an orchestral piece but, as often the case with contemporary works, the concert organisers asked that the length of the piece should not exceed ten minutes, so that a “standard” concert programme could follow. Dubugnon responded by writing three short works and they will be performed at different concerts in the Migros concert series. We were offered *Caprice No. 1* for starters; No. 2 follows next May and No. 3 will, we are told, be dedicated to the city of Rome.

As I listened to the Dubugnon, I jotted down all the names of composers which sprang immediately to mind, starting with Stravinsky (*Rite of Spring*) through Bernstein, Milhaud, Scriabin and Messaien (*Turangalila*). That almost tells you what the work sounded like; not at all unpleasant on the ear, jazzy, rhythmic, and similar to some of Salonen’s own works. If the other Caprices are of similar quality, it will be worthwhile filling a whole first half with it someday. The sudden ending of the work took everyone by surprise – a real caprice.

I had not heard Arabella Steinbacher, the soloist in the Brahms, before. At 33, she already has a successful international career, is half-German, half-Japanese and hails from Munich. She says in the programme note that she concentrates on twentieth century works and avoids the classics, yet her last recording is of the Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky concertos with Charles Dutoit and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. I have to say the Brahms concerto left me a bit cold: yes, it was technically virtually flawless, Steinbacher was assured in manner, displayed fine intonation but no special or individual character to the playing came to the fore despite playing a 1716 “Booth” Strad. It was just a little too cold and non-showy when compared to current competitors who can bring a work to life. Salonen’s rumbustious conducting did not help; he certainly does not hang about. There were ear-catching contributions from principal oboe (the venerable Gordon Hunt) and flute (Samuel Coles). Once or twice in the first movement the orchestra drowned out the soloist, the Philharmonia seemed to have forgotten they were not in the Festival or Albert Hall and Salonen failed to restrain the volume; surprising, given that Salonen was “Creative Chair” at the Tonhalle last year and knows the hall very well. The audience were mesmerized by Steinbacher’s first movement cadenza and by an interesting arrangement, by way of encore, of a Bach partita with added shades of *Dies Irae*.

I don’t normally associate Salonen’s name with Beethoven but he delivered a blistering and generally most satisfying account of the *Eroica*. Heroic, dramatic, vigorous and muscular were all the adjectives I jotted down for the first movement, with an excellent contribution from the timpanist – have the Philharmonia found a worthy successor to the wonderful Andy “Thumper” Smith? I could not find a name on the orchestra’s website.

In the weighty slow movement, it was – unusually – the second violins who caught my attention, no second cousins to the firsts this time. In the *Scherzo* the four horns were most impressive, led by Principal Katy Woolley. We were mystified why the trumpets were natural and valve-less; all credit to the trumpeters however, they were faultlessly played.

The Finale brought us more earthy and strident string playing. We came away thankful to Migros for bringing over this very fine London orchestra.

John Rhodes