

## Sevenoaks Symphony Orchestra - Saturday Feb23rd 2008

It's a while since an SSO review has had St Nicholas' Church recorded as the venue, and there must have been some players and audience who wondered how it would turn out. The logistics of threading a large orchestra round the pillars, pulpits and lecterns of a church inevitably leads to some compromises and some church acoustics are less than helpful. Darrell Davison and his players had clearly thought carefully and attuned their performance to the new situation with great skill.

Smetana's river portrait Vltava was a good piece to try out the new performance space, it has delicate moments with bubbling winds supported by strings, and it has the big orchestral sounds with full brass and a range of textures between. This performance was nicely paced with enough bloom on the sound to support but not overwhelm the rippling detail. There are moments in the score where the 'water' motive swaps between groups of players and just once or twice the transitions were a little lumpy but the grand sweep of the river was never uneasy.

Brahms' violin concerto is probably in the top five of favourites and certainly there was eager anticipation for the Australian Naoko Miyamoto. She delivered a performance that was strong on lyricism and line, and had a keen sense of the interplay between orchestra and soloist. That's not to say that her playing didn't have the virtuosity and panache required, particularly in the last movement, it was exciting but not just bravura – the music shone through. The orchestra, as we've come to expect, were adept partners, the woodwind and horns clearly enjoying their roles in both the opening and the slow movement. I enjoyed this performance which emphasised Brahms' classical roots and didn't get bogged down by over-romantic wallowing from the orchestra.

Sibelius' 1st symphony with its quiet start and conclusion and its almost patchwork construction can be difficult for audiences but Davison found a pace that made sense of the sometimes extreme contrasts, and I found myself thinking of Sibelius' nationalist music on more than one occasion. The strings really seemed at home in the slightly warmer acoustic of the church and produced the appropriate sounds of shimmering sunshine and deep romantic luxury as the music required. Woodwind and horns were able to work well as a unit, from my seat at the very back a clearly defined chorus. On just a couple of occasions the lower brass became a little too obvious but that's a tiny detail in a performance that will have got some of the audience thinking about Sibelius as not just the bloke who wrote Finlandia. The appreciative audience in the well filled St Nicholas I'm sure would have given many more curtain calls in a secular venue, that's probably the only drawback to being in church.