

Maidstone Symphony Orchestra, 23 March 2024
Brian Wright (conductor)
Iyad Sughayer (piano)
Mote Hall, Maidstone

Review by Susan Elkin – susanelkin.co.uk

Written late in Schubert's tragically short life, his *Symphony No 9* is "Great" in every sense. It is long, intense, hugely challenging and stunningly beautiful. And MSO delivered a very pleasing performance. The opening is every horn player's nightmare but the performance soon settled into a warmly musical rendering.

I admired, among many other things, the precision of the string vamp in support of the woodwind melody in the *andante*. It is always good to hear string detail crisply articulated. There was delightful work from the trumpets and principal flautist Anna Binney excelled herself – as ever. Wright stressed the dynamic contrasts across the *ländler* and the trio in the third movement and really brought out that exquisite little homage to Beethoven in the finale.

To perform a work of this scale and complexity as well as this must have taken a great deal of rehearsal and I'm not surprised that everyone looked tired at the end.

The first half of the concert comprised Mendelssohn's attractive, programmatic overture *The Fair Melusine* which deserves to get more outings, followed by Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No 3*.

Pianist Iyad Sughayer is an exceptionally charismatic, communicative performer. He plays with his face as much as his hands, clearly adores the music and feels every note and nuance. The bright, opening *allegro* came with plenty of the brio the composer stipulated with Wright ably managing a businesslike accompaniment from the orchestra. Rarely have I heard the cadenza played with more electric drama which made for a real contrast with the ensuing *andante* with its muted strings and impassioned – but never mannered opening. It was played, palpably, with love. Sughayer's infectious enthusiasm – and very evident communication with the orchestra – ensured rippling insouciance and *joie-de-vivre* in the final movement as he launched it out of the pregnant silence at the end of the *andante*.

Sughayer, who comes from Jordan and has Jordanian/Palestinian heritage, then played a very short lyrical Khachaturian piece as his encore: a complete contrast to the Beethoven. And I was, incidentally, delighted to see him in the interval chatting very naturally and engagingly but unassumingly to some admiring children. Yes, the next generation needs to be encouraged and brought to concerts!