

May 2024 Susan Elkin - www.susanelkin.co.uk

It was rather a treat to have, as concert opener, a piece written by an MSO member. Philip Le Bas is principal bassoon and his *Yuki-Onna* is an imaginative response to an enigmatic Japanese folk tale. Descending scales which escalate texturally lead to lots of crunch brass chords in the first section and I liked the orchestration which included snare drum, two harps and xylophone. Furrowed brows, though, indicated some anxious counting and suggested that this is a pretty challenging piece to play.

Jonathan Leibovitz - with his exceptionally long slim fingers - is an engaging soloist to watch and it's good to hear Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* played on a basset clarinet so that we heard all those delicious low notes as Mozart intended. Leibovitz brought sunny lightness and colourful phrasing to a very familiar work thereby making it feel unexpectedly fresh. The adagio showed star quality in the delivery of one of Mozart's most mellifluous melodies and he delivered the finale with mercurial charm.

There was no encore because the second half of the concert began with a second piece for solo clarinet and orchestra: Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie*. The orchestral part is demanding because there's so little to hang on to but of course Leibovitz's playing was creamily beautiful. He's definitely one to watch.

Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* (1944) is an ambitious work of many mood changes delivered here with enthusiastic competence and commitment – although everyone looked tired at the end. The brass section was particularly striking in the first movement and there was lovely playing from the woodwind (especially bassoon) in the second. Because it has five movements loosely organised like a palindrome, the concerto ends more or less where it began with some fine string work along the way, particularly from the violas, in the penultimate movement and in the fiendish fugue at the end.

All in all it was an interestingly and enjoyably programmed concert with which to end the season, and I won't be the only audience member already to be looking forward eagerly to 12 October.

March 2024 Susan Elkin - www.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!

February 2024 Susan Elkin - www.susanelkin.co.uk

It was a definitely a Big Works Night with batteries of percussion, double brass and harp all helping to nail MSO's vibrant, signature sound.

First up was Wagner's *Overture Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in which Brian Wright allowed us to enjoy all those majestic ralls, although the skill in playing Wagner well is also to deliver the contrasting lyrical passages with tenderness and there was plenty of that too along with exceptionally fine brass playing.

Then it was slightly reduced forces for Sibelius's 1904 *Violin Concerto*. It's one of the most challenging in the repertoire but Mathilde Milwidsky played it with her accustomed, focused charm. I've noticed the exceptional clarity of her playing before and here it shone creamily through the aching passion of the first movement, followed by that long *cadenza* and then some fine cross string work. Wright controlled the woodwind perfectly into the legato ending of the *adagio* and Milwidsky's rendering of the final *allegro* was both elegant and eloquent.

After that her *Adagio* from Bach's G minor sonata was a complete palate cleanser. I loved the silvery beauty of her perfectly placed double stopping and trills.

Scheherazade with its almost literally fabulous orchestration (bassoon over double bass pedal note at opening of second movement for example) is always a magnificent show stopper and this performance, full of power and grandiosity, was no exception. Highlights included the way Wright made sure we felt every yearning note of the violin and cello solos at the beginning, the excellent string playing in the third movement, George English's side drum playing and the brass fanfares in the fourth and then – lump in the throat stuff – the breathtaking balance of the final harmonic from the solo violin.

The huge round of applause saved for leader Andrew Laing was richly deserved in this concert. There is a lot of solo work in *Scheherazade* and he played with exquisite poignancy. Beautiful work indeed.

December 2023 Susan Elkin - www.susanelkin.co.uk

An all English programme with three works likely to be unfamiliar to most of the audience is a brave undertaking, but on the whole Brian Wright and the MSO carried it off with their usual aplomb.

At the heart of the evening was *The Lark Ascending*, regularly voted by the British public its favourite piece of classical music. Violinist Benjamin Baker presented Ralph Vaughan Williams's evocative masterpiece as a substantial post-interval encore and he played it – his hands small and his fingers

fascinatingly neat – with immaculate musical control. Yes, he, and we, really did soar and hover with the eponymous bird. Baker's pre-interval work was Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's G minor *Violin Concerto* – an unusual key for a violin concerto – and it was a warmly business-like performance starting with the grandiloquence of the opening movement with its flamboyant melodies. I admired the gentle lyricism in the *andante*. It's very hard to achieve but Baker gave us a passionate song-like quality carefully supported by Wright delivering the instrumental detail in the muted accompaniment. The legato violin over the short wind notes in third movement was another rather lovely moment.

The concert had begun with Holst's ballet music for *The Perfect Fool* and ended with Elgar's *Falstaff* so theatrical reference was, in effect, a theme. The Holst piece, which came soon after *The Planets*, enjoys similar quirky orchestration so there was plenty of opportunity for MSO players to show just how good they are from the trombone opening, to the bassoons grunting at the very bottom of their register. In the second dance, *The Spirits of Water*, the harp and flute moment was attractively balanced.

Elgar's *Falstaff* is a musical exploration of the character of Shakespeare's "Fat Jack" as he appears in the two *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V* in which he dies off stage. It's a colourful episodic piece which required the return of full forces, including five percussionists. Those of us who know the plays well – from the bawdy comedy to the cruel trickery and ultimately to the devastating rejection – can appreciate Elgar's imaginative contrasts including whispering strings and wind interjection. It was all pretty accurately played here, with some delightful bassoon work, although it's a very challenging piece – Elgar is never straightforward - and there was a feeling in places that the strings were working at the far edge of their ability. Nonetheless it was quite an achievement for a community orchestra – another feather in MSO's cap.

October 2023 Susan Elkin - www.susanelkin.co.uk

The opening item in the first concert of Maidstone Symphony Orchestra's 113th season was Smetana's overture to *The Bartered Bride*. It's one of those "lot of notes" pieces with a terrifyingly exposed second violin passage but in Brian Wright's warmly safe hands, MSO delivered it at a nippy tempo and with appropriate exuberance. The orchestral sound was, as ever, beautifully balanced. This is Wright's 33rd season with the orchestra and that total, long established trust between him and the players shines through.

Then came British cellist Maxim Calver to play Shostakovich's *First Cello Concerto* (1959) – his third concert with the orchestra. This bleak, anguished but beautiful concerto has become quite well known since at least two people (Guy Johnston and Sheku Kanneh-Mason) have won BBC Young Musician of the year with it. Calver's playing was both intense and insouciant as he hammered out those relentless, menacing rhythms in the first movement. I loved the brooding, legato lament he dug out of the slow movement and his mellow mournfulness of tone in the cadenza – carefully applying vibrato to some notes and not others as much Shostakovich string writing seems to demand. He followed the concerto with Pablo Casals's sorrowful *Song of the Birds* as his encore, and hinted it was a way of marking these "sad times".

And so to Brahms's *First Symphony*, often regarded as a homage to Beethoven, although it's a lot more than that. Wright set it going with all the grandiloquent panache it needs and brought out plenty of nicely balanced lyrical wind detail in the first movement. The *andante* gives us one of Brahms's many lovely oboe melodies played here with gentle passion and the violin solo (leader Andrew Laing) with the horn at the end of the movement was arrestingly moving. After a lilting *allegretto* – a sort of descendant of the classical minuet and trio – Wright delivered the big Beethovenian melody in the final movement with all the right Brahmsian spin and some attractive flute work. And all this was achieved with commensurate professionalism despite a distracting problem with Mote Hall's lighting rig in the second half.

May 2023 - Susan Elkin / Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

During Covid when the only live music I had access to was the stuff I played myself – if I was very lucky in duet with my “bubbled” son – I yearned and yearned to hear a big orchestra with five percussionists, a harp and lots of brass. I was like a starving person fantasising about food. And I thought of that, gleefully, at this concert as it launched into the opening Berlioz *Roman Carnival Overture* which, almost literally, has all the bells and whistles. Brian Wright took the big melody much more slowly than I’m accustomed to and the fugal string passage wasn’t quite together but the tambourine work was delightful and the mood vibrantly joyful. Yes, this is the sort of thing I dreamed of when we weren’t allowed to have it.

Talented Mayumi Kanagawa is an unshowy performer. The music, her fingers and the violin – the famous 1725 “Wilhelmj” Stradivarius on loan from the Nippon Music Foundation – make all the statements. She delivered the lyrical passages in the outer movements of Prokofiev’s *First Concerto* (1917) with sumptuous, decisive precision. The middle movement is a virtuosic show piece in which Kanagawa rose to every challenge including some arresting left hand pizzicatos and accurately dramatic, double-stopped glissandi. It was an outstanding performance. And her choice of encore, the familiar *Rondo* from Bach’s *Partita in E major*, was such a well-chosen contrast that it felt like sucking a mouth-cleansing orange segment.

The grand finale both for this concert and for the 2022/3 MSO season was Tchaikovsky’s grandiloquent, sometimes anguished *Fourth Symphony*. And it was a fitting choice which certainly fed my ongoing longing for the big orchestra sound. With six desks of first violins we got a rich string sound to complement the brass. Over the years, Brian Wright really has perfected a strategy for getting the balance right with this orchestra in this rather unlikely venue whose day job is a sports hall. The second movement really leaned on the tortured melodies, written only a year after the composer’s disastrous marriage. The exquisite bassoon solo over pizzicato strings at the end was a high spot.

The famous long, finger-aching pizzicato passages in the third movement are notoriously difficult and a pretty adventurous idea for 1878. Here it was generally cohesive and full of all the right narrative tension. Then, to cap it all, we got the fourth movement at a really exciting speed, exploding with all the *fuoco* the composer wanted. And I suppose the drama of those terrific cymbal clashes at the end will have to last me until the next MSO concert when the new season opens on 14 October.

March 2023 - Jonathan Watts / Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

It would be difficult to find a programme which demonstrates more effectively the variety of the Austro-German musical tradition, with the delicate but infectious energy of Mozart’s overture, Strauss’s lush lyricism, melodic genius and joie-de-vivre and the whole panoply of emotion unleashed by Bruckner within a tightly controlled structure. With so many exposed passages and frequent transitions of mood and texture, these are works which are technically demanding and require extraordinary levels of skill, discipline, musicality, confidence and sheer endurance from all sections of the orchestra – and the members of the MSO responded triumphantly to the challenge with as fine a performance as you will ever hear of all three works.

Conductor Brian Wright set a brisk tempo for the *Marriage of Figaro* overture in which the strong, accurate, well-articulated string-playing produced a real sense of excitement and anticipation for the shenanigans of the opera itself. There was great rhythmic definition and some wonderfully soft passages while the ensemble playing was absolutely precise but dramatic, with some thrilling crescendos and tutti interjections. Composed by Strauss when in his late 70s, his *2nd Horn Concerto* has all the liveliness of his first, composed when he was just 18, but with perhaps greater nostalgic lyricism and even a sense of escape from what was happening in the world when it was written in 1942, though this is not the place to discuss Strauss and politics - and I wonder if cancel-culture has yet entered the concert-hall. Ben Goldscheider’s mastery of this notoriously difficult and unpredictable instrument was simply extraordinary. He produced a wide variety of tonal colour – more than I have ever heard from a horn - and the more lyrical sections were utterly

compelling in the gentle sensitivity with which he played sensual melodic lines. The crisp runs, changes of speed and more playful passages showed his technical dexterity, but at no point was technique sacrificed to letting the music speak for itself. In its scale, this is almost a chamber-work, and Ben's subtle and emotionally-intelligent approach was exactly right. There was measured, balanced, but richly textured accompaniment and interaction from the orchestra, with some particularly fine wind passages, horn and string-playing; at several points, the solo horn part was able to emerge wonderfully from the orchestral ensemble. Overall, this was a nuanced performance of inspired exuberance and melodic delight. By contrast, Ben played as an encore Bernhard Krol's 'Laudatio' of 1966 which, despite its name, provides a hauntingly poignant counterweight to the Strauss. Ben's controlled performance, with some amazing pianissimo playing and an ability to evoke both melancholy and peaceful resignation, made this one of the highlights of the evening.

Bruckner's hour-long 4th *Symphony* ranges across the emotions, but requires strict discipline. Brian Wright's elegant, efficient and unobtrusive style of conducting coped brilliantly with the frequent changes of mood and tempo; the balance between different sections of the orchestra was superb and the sound was never ponderous. The brass in particular played with real sensitivity and were at no point overwhelming. The lower strings and violas produced a fullness of sound in their melodic passages, which often had an engagingly dark quality, while the upper strings, when not playing a punishing tremolando, were serene in their tone and tuning especially in the more chromatic passages and fiendish runs. There were some thrilling crescendos and full ensemble sections, interspersed with some exquisite wind and string playing. I was also impressed by the subtle drama added to this work (and to the Strauss) by the excellent timpanist. This symphony provides an emotional journey and the MSO's performance was positively uplifting. The evening certainly left me exhilarated.

February 2023 - Susan Elkin / Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

There can be few more uplifting ways of finishing a concert than with a moving, joyous account of Beethoven's glorious *Symphony No. 7*, recently found in a poll to be the most popular of all his symphonies.

Brian Wright treated the first movement as a fairly gentle *vivace* which allowed all the glorious detail to sail through with some especially lovely work from flautist Anna Binney whose flute clearly agrees with Wagner that this symphony is 'the apotheosis of the dance'.

The *Allegretto*, arguably one of the best movements Beethoven ever wrote with that insistent rhythm and its built-up layers, was sonorous and tender. And the *Finale* was played with as much *brio* and slick *panache* as I've heard it played anywhere. Earworms were the order of the day during my drive home to London.

Of course, the Saint-Saëns *First Cello Concerto*, played without breaks, is much less well known. Soloist, Maciej Kułakowski has a deceptively relaxed stage persona – frequently catching the eye of the leader or conductor with a half smile. But his insouciant manner belies the passion of his playing. In a piece full of contrasts, we got some magnificent lyrical playing especially in the third movement and the lightness of the cello sound over muted strings in the central *allegretto* was expertly judged. Then, after joking pleasantly with the audience he played, as an encore, Grazyna Bacewicz's *Polish Caprice* which is short, snappy and enjoyably virtuosic.

The evening had begun with Schumann's *Overture, Scherzo and Finale*. Effectively a mini-symphony with a movement missing, it's a piece which doesn't get as many outings as it should, so well done MSO for introducing it to audience members who might not have heard it before. I admired the resolute playing,

especially strings, in the overture; the dynamic colour and gentle warmth which Wright stressed in the second movement and the melodious energy of the finale.

November 2022 - Our regular reviewer, Susan Elkin, was “away”.

Brian Wright commented: The morning after the concert I emailed the players: “Another terrific concert, thank you. I thought the programme worked really well - something good but neglected, something quirky and something truly great. Ariel Lanyi’s Brahms (*1st Piano Concerto*) was simply world-class, both technically and musically. He plays from within the music with complete understanding, and he rarely imposes himself on it. That is rare and a true joy. His Bach encore was simply spellbinding.

The Weber (*Overture, The Ruler of the Spirits*) and Shostakovich (*Symphony No.9*) came off very well. I took enormous pleasure from all of those exposed solos in the Shostakovich - Angela Love’s piccolo, Anna Binney’s flute, Andy Laing’s violin and Gary Rossiter’s trumpet. But I have to single out Graeme Vinall’s brilliant clarinet and of course Philip Le Bas’ poignant bassoon laments. Tutti strings, winds, brass and percussion all did us proud too!”

October 2022 - Susan Elkin / Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

As Brian Wright observed before the concert in his introductory notes, a lot has happened since the last MSO concert in May. Yes, it was tastefully appropriate to start with the *National Anthem* and the Gordon Jacob *Fanfare* (written for the Coronation in 1953) which preceded it gave the excellent brass section a chance to show what they can do and to warm up before launching into Humperdinck’s melodious *Hansel and Gretel* overture. Played with tender warmth, the overture, after a slightly disjointed start, showcased MSO’s horn section well.

Thence to Mendelssohn’s *Violin Concerto*. Mathilde Milwidsky was a late substitute for Irène Duval who was indisposed. What a find! I hope she’ll be back to play with MSO again soon. She looks like a Greek goddess, has fascinating fingers – tiny but long with squared-off tips going down like mini-pistons – and plays with unusual poise and elegance. Her cross string work in the opening and closing allegros was gracefully incisive, her double stopping immaculate and her rendering of the rousing final bars packed excitement in spades. Moreover I admired the way she and Wright managed the transitional passage between the first movement and the *andante*. Some conductors come to a full stop there but this performance delivered a real sense of collaborative cohesion.

After the interval with all that brass, percussion and two harpists back in place, we got Elgar’s glorious *First Symphony* in challenging A flat major. No string player likes four flats (especially when it’s interspersed with D minor passages) but the intonation was exemplary throughout this exhausting marathon. One of the many high spots was the attention Wright paid to the underpinning lower string rhythm at the beginning along with the precision of the rapidly descending scales, passed like a baton between sections later in the movement. Good to hear Elgar’s characteristic *nobilmente* sounding fresh and free from mawkishness too. There was crispness in the *Allegro molto* and a gloriously thick texture (lovely trombone work at the bottom) in the fourth movement. Best of all, though, was Wright’s take on the *Adagio* – rich and affectionate without ever being soupy, even at the Nimrod-like moment which felt wistful rather than tragic.

Arnold's Tam O'Shanter overture is a brave choice for an opener because it must be a challenge to get all those potentially disparate elements together. Brian Wright, however, ensured we heard incisive percussion and bold brass against threatening strings until the folksy Scots melodies break boozily through. And it was all pretty coherent.

Daniel Lebhardt is a calm but charismatic performer, well supported by Wright who is always good at musical collaboration with young soloists. The second Rachmaninov concerto may have become a bit of a war horse but here it sounded fresh – and almost fragrant. The first movement (Moderato) was thoughtfully warm with a nicely judged balance between flute and piano while Lebhardt brought a lot of intensity to the second movement in which I particularly admired the clarity of the muted string work. The soloist's insouciant musical charm helped to deliver a lively finale (Allegro scherzando) in which the orchestra did wonders with nicely punctuated syncopation and what fun that pianissimo cymbal rhythm is.

For his encore Lebhardt took us to a different sound world with a nod to his homeland and Schubert's Hungarian Melody. It was a gentle but elegant contrast.

And so to Sibelius Symphony number 2, which Wright packed with all the brooding tension it needs, having observed soberly in his introduction that it was written in 1901 against a background of Finland trying to free itself from Russian rule – an alarmingly topical issue at present.

The orchestra found fluttery anxiety in the repeated crotchet motif which dominates the opening Allegretto and gave us a brooding, unsettling second movement in which the bassoons packed real menace and the silent pauses were eloquent. The Vivacissimo whipped along as it should but without blurring of sound and there was wistful warmth in the contrasting oboe-led melody.

It's all too easy to over play the big dramatic shift into the final movement but Wright resisted that in this measured performance – just letting the music speak for itself as it worked towards the (very marked on this occasion) final melodic statement led by the cellos.

Thus we got a resounding end to MSO's 111th season. Roll on the 112th.

March 2022 - Our regular reviewer, Susan Elkin, was "away".

Brian Wright commented: Those at our March concert heard something very special. The young British cellist, Maxim Calver, was playing his first-ever performance of Dvořák's great *Cello Concerto* and he absolutely nailed it. He was a total delight to work with - technically, musically and personally - and frankly, in my long career, his was one of the finest performances of this wonderful concerto that I've had the privilege to conduct. Four years ago we had the joy with MSO of welcoming Sheku Kanneh-Mason to play his first-ever performance of the Elgar concerto, but for me Max's Dvořák debut was equally as impressive. His beautifully judged encore was Pablo Casals' poignant *Song of the Birds*, written in 1939 as "a plea for peace". Max will return..!

Elsewhere, we were sadly affected by a covid outbreak and it was an extraordinary effort by all concerned to get the show on the road. We lost around ten players in the week before the concert, but gaps were magnificently filled and I don't think the audience was unduly aware of our problems. We started, as a supportive tribute, with the *Ukrainian National Anthem*, and there was a great deal of highly committed playing in both Brahms' *Tragic Overture* and César Franck's *Symphony in D Minor*.

There was an upbeat atmosphere of new year/new optimism for this well attended first concert of 2022 spiced with a strong sense of the worst being behind us. And the overture to Mozart's last opera, *The Magic Flute* (1791) was an aptly chosen opener. The orchestra made it sound bright, chirpy and celebratory especially in the fugato quaver passages which were delightfully crisp.

And so to Beethoven – and, arguably, the loveliest violin concerto ever written, premiered only 15 years after *The Magic Flute*. Benjamin Baker is an unshowy soloist who breathes the music like a singer – often with an impish half smile. He and Brian Wright made sure we heard every detail of the orchestral parts as well as the solo line and I loved the way they moved, as a team into the spirited rondo.

Two things, however really distinguished this performance. First, Baker chose to play the Christian Tetzlaff cadenzas, adapted from the ones Beethoven wrote for the piano version of the concerto and using a timpani accompaniment in the first one. I'm familiar with recordings of this but had never heard it live. Keith Price on timps, Brian Wright on the podium and Baker out front gave us a very arresting - if quirky - rendering. No wonder the audience applauded - unusually at an MSO concert - at the end of the first movement. Second, Baker's encore, a movement from Bach's A Minor sonata, presented double stopping so breathtakingly skilled that it sounded like two instruments.

It was, intentionally or not, a chronological concert which shifted forward a further 137 years after the interval with Ralph Vaughan Williams's fifth symphony: a work which has four movements, three of them slow, and full of key changes and different time signatures, so it was real contrast to the classicism of the first half.

Wright dug out plenty of lyrical passion as he delivered that characteristically RVW "wafty" quality - always with fluidity and sometimes with an evocatively clenched left fist. There was fine work from Simon Phillips as principal horn sailing over the texture especially in the first movement. The muted strings patterning with the wind in the second movement created the required "misterioso" and, notwithstanding one or two earlier ragged entries, I liked the way Wright controlled the magical dying away ending in three movements.

Cheerful Rossini is a good, warm antidote when the weather's wintry and we've just, two hours earlier, heard yet another alarming Covid press briefing. Brian Wright packed *The Italian Girl in Algiers* with all the fun and wit it cries out for especially through precise pizzicato, well controlled Rossini trademark accelerando passages and some lovely flute solo work (bravo principal flute, Anna Binney).

Then came the quiet modesty of Olivier Stankiewicz with Mozart's *Oboe Concerto* – we hear the flute version more often but, actually, it was written first for the oboe. Stankiewicz, principal oboe with the London Symphony Orchestra and with a flourishing parallel solo career, enchanted an MSO audience four years ago with the Strauss concerto so it was a treat to see him back.

I loved his incisive creaminess of tone, especially in the Adagio – one of Mozart's many exquisite slow movements. In contrast he gave us lots of cheerful perkiness in the concluding rondo. His circular breathing is so fascinating to watch, that it's almost a distraction particularly in his encore: two short movements (Pan and Arethusa) from Britten's *Metamorphoses*.

In many ways, however, the most interesting work came after the interval in the shape of Brahms *Serenade No 1*, a substantial forty-minute work. It's very familiar from recordings and radio. But I had never heard it live before and Brian Wright told the audience that, at 75, this was the first time he'd ever conducted it in

public. Perhaps because it has six movements, not thematically linked, it doesn't feel like a symphony. Or maybe it's because it explores different styles as it goes along. Either way it doesn't get many outings. And it should.

It was, therefore, a real pleasure to hear MSO helping to put that right. The performance took a while to settle. I'm guessing most players hadn't played it before. The most striking thing about the opening Allegro was the pleasing work – rich and tuneful – from lower strings. Although it was arguably a bit understated, I liked the way the dance rhythms in the first Scherzo were played. Then in the very “Brahmsian” central Adagio we got some gloriously strong sound from horns and woodwind, although the upper string interjections were a bit wispy. The finest moment, for me, was the chirpy clarinet (Paul Bourdillon) and bassoon (Philip Le Bas) duet in the Minuet before the work sauntered off to give us a vibrant second Scherzo and a resounding rondo Allegro to finish.

Give it a couple of years, MSO, and then play it again, please. We need to hear this interesting piece more often.

October 2021 - Susan Elkin / Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Rarely have I watched a performer who exuded as much palpable pleasure in the music as Mayumi Kanagawa playing Bruch's *First Violin Concerto*. She smiled several times at the leader during the piece and rocked appreciatively during the orchestral passages. Perhaps, since this was MSO's first concert for 20 months, she was as delighted to be playing live as the audience was to be there.

Technically pretty impeccable, Kanagawa gave us some fine cross string work and double stopping and, later, dug out lots of romantic richness in the *Allegro Moderato*. The orchestra, meanwhile, accompanied her warmly. I occasionally hear in colours and perceive G minor as a navy blue key. Kanagawa's simple dark blue outfit reflected that so perhaps she does too.

Her showstopper encore, Paganini's *The Hunt*, was very welcome icing on the cake. Played with expert insouciance and lots of colour, her flamboyant double stopping and “impossible” leaps certainly impressed this indifferent amateur violinist.

The concerto was sandwiched between an incisively dramatic account of Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture* and, after the interval, Mendelssohn's *Third Symphony “Scottish”*. I was pleased to note that Brian Wright took the whole symphony more or less *attacca* so that there was no space or temptation for audience applause between movements. It makes the work so much more cohesive than if it's chopped up.

Despite occasional fragments of raggedness, it resounded with melodious energy. The management of dynamics in the opening movement created a lot of lively interest and I liked the way Wright let the wind interjections, especially bassoon, shine through the texture. We were also treated to an elegantly understated second movement and as for the *Adagio* ... a conductor I was working under once commented: “This is one of the most sublime melodies ever written but you mustn't milk it”. MSO didn't ... but I still had something in my eye at the end.

Yes, it's utterly brilliant to see MSO in action again. They still sit at separate stands which makes page turning difficult for string players and the distancing changes the sound slightly but it's hundreds of times better than the long, long silence we've all been through.

Covid-19 epidemic: The concerts scheduled for March & May 2020 were cancelled, as was the whole of the 2020/21 season.

There are few more atmospheric pieces than Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes*. It only needs a bar or two of those ethereal pianissimo high strings and you're standing on the remote Suffolk coast gazing out to sea. MSO had imported lots of extra players for this ambitious piece (and the Elgar with which the concert ended) so we had double brass, four percussionists and eight double basses – all contributing to the colourful descriptiveness which Brian Wright drew out of the orchestra.

Then we skipped 150 years back to the classical world of Weber and reduced forces to accompany Emma Johnson in the *Second Clarinet Concerto*. Always a charismatic player, she twinkled with delight as she played, turning the concerto into an engaging musical conversation, especially in the first movement. She also gave us a nicely controlled *andante* and enjoyably sparky syncopation in the third movement.

Unusual programming meant she was again the soloist in another concerto after the interval. Malcolm Arnold's *Second Clarinet Concerto* is not very well known and, although she played it with panache, it's obvious why we don't hear it more often. It's an incongruous mixture of disparate elements including a long improvised cadenza, a soulful central *lento* and then "The pre-Goodman Rag". Even Johnson's fine playing and Brian Wright's skilful direction failed to endow it with any sense of cohesion.

And so, finally, to *Enigma Variations* in which all those mood changes and potential pitfalls were adeptly negotiated with the wit of Variation 3 and Variation 11 nicely brought out. It was also a treat to hear Elgar's imaginative orchestration so clearly stressed: the tuba in Variation 7, the piccolo in Variation 8 and the viola and bassoon solos in Variation 10, for example. And I admired the tempi in Variation 9 (Nimrod). There often is a tendency to play it so slowly that it feels as if it's dragging. Wright resisted that by keeping it moving which worked well.

In short, another good night for MSO.

It was obviously disappointing that John Lill, the Society's President, was unable to perform Brahms' *Second Piano Concerto* but there could surely be no complaints about the barn-storming reading of Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto* which Alexander Ullman gave us. With the orchestra on fine form, they seemed to galvanise each other in a way which was highly exhilarating as well as musically impressive. In the opening movement, Alexander Ullman had an aggressive edge to his playing, with snapped phrases and real attack. If there was a greater sense of lightness in the slow movement, the centre section came across as skittishly improvisatory – a real skill in itself. The easy flowing melodic lines of the finale built with fire and resolution to a magnificent climax which was, understandably, received with an outpouring of applause and cheering.

Not that the first half of the evening had been unimpressive. It opened with a fiery, hard-driven, reading of Beethoven's Overture to *Fidelio*. Brian Wright seems to like driving his players hard and this was a good example of the quality it can arouse.

The other main work was Schumann's *Fourth Symphony*. If this seems very Brahmsian, which it does, it is more likely that Brahms is learning from the older composer, and a close friend to boot, than the other way round. Brian Wright ensured that the work ran through as a continuous whole, moving seamlessly across the many shifts in tone and texture, to say nothing of the melodic developments. That the final movement is little more, technically, than a shift into the major is a sign of Schumann's mastery of orchestration by the time he came to revise the work. It blazed with authority, the trumpets giving us a real thrill as the climax approached, and the horns – now well focused – warmed the final pages.

We have to wait until the new-year for the next concert on 1 February which brings us works by Britten, Weber, Malcolm Arnold and Elgar.

October 2019 - Dr. Brian Hick / Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

The new season opened in a blaze of warmth and power with Chabrier's popular *España*. The large orchestra – close to a hundred players – was essentially there for the Strauss in the second half but it made for a large scale and highly extrovert reading of a work too often heard simply as background music to other activities.

If the rest of the evening was less familiar it was none the less welcome. Callum Smart was the soloist in Korngold's *Violin Concerto*. If this is not a work which comes immediately to mind when one thinks of the concerto repertoire it certainly has considerable appeal, even though the opening is stark and often feels remote. The odd flashes of warmth display the cinematic origins of the score as does the gentle romanticism of the slow movement. The finale is all bluster and fire, with lurking pirates and historical romances hidden beneath the heroic dances and fanfares. Callum Smart's warm sense of engagement almost convinced us it was a great work.

After the interval we had Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben* released upon us in all its magnificent opulence and virility. Strauss uses the vast panoply of forces at his command to milk both the tonal and emotional palette, and frequently overwhelms with the sheer level of volume – no wonder the orchestra need their new protective shields. Yet within this score there are many hauntingly beautiful moments and many passages of fine solo playing. This highlights a somewhat strange dichotomy within the programming. The solo violin part, admirably played by guest leader Andrew Laing, is effectively a violin concerto in its own right, so that we ended up with two lengthy violin solos by two fine violinists. All very much to our benefit but unexpected if you were not ready for it.

Throughout Brian Wright had galvanised his large forces with tact and skill, particularly in the rabble-raising passages in the Strauss which raised the hair on the back of your neck.

May 2019 - Susan Elkin / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Tom Poster is a distinctive pianist. His account of the Schumann concerto was full of warmth and verve especially in the flamboyant third movement. What made this performance exceptionally memorable, though, was his sensitive rendering of the pianissimo passages which had the entire audience listening spellbound probably in incredulity that anyone could play the piano so softly. An accomplished speaker, he then gave us a perfectly judged Clara Schumann nocturne, having explained that she is "in" all of Robert's music as well as having given over a thousand recitals herself. How appropriate, Poster also observed, to play music by both Schumanns in Mental Health Week.

The rest of the programme was upbeat, dance focused and Russian. We began with the orchestral version of Borodin's Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor complete with lots of attention to dramatic crescendi with some attractive quiet passages interspersed with tension especially from busy, rhythmic strings.

After the interval came the Rachmaninov Symphonic Dances. It's a big play by any standards but Brian Wright grabbed it by the horns to good effect. The driving rhythms of the first movement and the lilting lyrical minor key work in the second were particularly attractive. Of course this 1940 piece is a bit of a percussion showcase – including xylophone, glockenspiel, tubular bells and gong along with bass drum, timps and various other things – and the six players here did a spectacular job.

This well attended event was the orchestra's annual charity concert. His Honour Jeremy Carey DL spoke briefly at the beginning and thanked MSO for supporting his chosen charity HearSay which works with local children and families affected by the Autistic Spectrum. It was a rousing and very successful end to the 2018/19 season

March 2019 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

For the penultimate concert of the season Brian Wright brought us a headily romantic programme with some interesting parallels. He was right to point out that Dvorak's Symphonic Variations are rarely performed which is strange given their immediacy and lyricism. Perhaps it is the structure of the work, which at times seems to meander through its moods and textures, enjoying the moment rather than wanting to get to the end. Yet the end itself justifies the approach. Just as we think we are in for a classical fugal climax Dvorak throws this over for an exuberant polka and an almost hedonistic conclusion. Throughout, detail impressed and the many changes of texture were well found.

Benjamin Baker made a welcome return as soloist in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto. His approach drew interesting parallels with the earlier Dvorak for the first two movements focused on quiet introspection rather than the more showy technical details – not that there was anything wrong with the brilliant technique he brings to the work – but that he explored the inner life of the score rather than its surface details. Only in the final movement did he allow himself to relax into the joyous outburst of the folk-dance rhythms – a move which many of the original listeners found vulgar and inappropriate. Today, thankfully, we can enjoy ourselves without feeling guilty.

After the interval we heard Brahms' Second Symphony. The opening movement unfolded with a mellow warmth, unhurried but never too slow. Dynamic control impressed, allowing individual voices to shine through, and there was particularly fine playing from the cellos. The Adagio had an unexpected heroism in its attack which led into bright wind playing for the Allegretto. The final movement was again unhurried even if swiftly moving, and the brass came into their own with a magnificent, blazing fanfare at the climax.

February 2019 - Susan Elkin / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Three big works meant an enlarged orchestra (85 players) which included four percussionists, piano, celeste and harp as well as big string sections. And they were all in pretty good form despite the off-puttingly cold weather (which had cost the orchestra a rehearsal, Brian Wright informed us at the beginning) and the sparser than sometimes audience.

The star of the evening was American soprano April Fredrick who sang Wagner's gut-wrenching Prelude and Liebestod from Tristan and Isolde followed by Richard Strauss's Four Last Songs. She is an unusually charismatic performer, engaging herself emotionally from the first bar of that arresting Wagnerian string passage – nicely played here by MSO players rising in a body to the occasion. By the time Fredrick actually began to sing (off-book) I was mesmerised by the power of her voice, her control and her communication of musical passion. She had me on the edge of my seat and in tears.

Strauss's Four Last Songs is a very special valedictory work and it was quite a treat to hear (and see) this final homage to the composer's soprano wife and their long marriage performed so well. Fredrick sang Fruehling (Spring) with smiling eyes and joy in every note before finding mellow melodiousness in the lovely low register, sostenuto notes of September. She then gave us poignant assertion of that beautiful tune in Beim Schlafengehen (Going to Sleep) which she sang through tearful smiles. Finally came a resolute, immaculately sung, sombre Im Abendrot (At Sunset) with Andy Bridges doing a splendid job with muted tuba and Wright managing the pianissimo ending with adept tenderness as it dies away.

And so to Shostakovich's magnificent fifth symphony. Wright provided masses of D minor mystery in the

opening movement and made sure we heard lots of orchestral colour including drama from the xylophone and fine flute and clarinet solos. Also noteworthy was the crisp pizzicato work in the allegretto and the sensitivity the orchestra achieved in the largo. Shostakovich, of course, knew a thing or two about contrast and Wright took the loud, rhythmic, grandiloquent finale at a suitably cracking pace. This striking movement is always a field day for the timpanist whose part is anything but subtle and Owain Williams was clearly enjoying himself. No wonder he looked exhausted at the end.

December 2018 - Susan Elkin / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

A slightly less populist concert than MSO often presents, we began with Kodaly's Dances of Galanta. Brian Wright observed in his introduction that the concert's three works all have folk themes and origins. That was very clear in the opener which the orchestra played, after a rather exposed shaky start, with rich vibrancy. The fast and furious string work and the flute solos were especially noteworthy.

Gordon Jacobs's 1955 trombone concerto may not be a great work (somewhere between Eric Coates and Vaughan-Williams on an off day with an awful lot of predictable arpeggios) but it's a rare treat to see the trombone take centre stage. It was also delightful to see the grown up Peter Moore back in Maidstone to play it. In 2008 he was the youngest ever winner of the BBC Young Musician of the Year and played with MSO soon after. Still looking barely old enough to have left school, Moore found lyrical clarity in every note during a thoughtful performance which demanded to be listened to very attentively. And the Sarabande by Bach which he played as an encore was stunningly beautiful.

And so to a Mahler marathon. His long first symphony is very demanding and it was played here with unflagging energy. Personally I've always found the opening indecisive, disparate and wishy-washy with its cuckoo-ing woodwind and offstage brass but Wright held it together competently. There was some elegant playing in the second movement including nice string glissandi in the trio. The third movement is, of course, one of Mahler's best. Jasmine Otaki played the double bass solo – the memorable minor key Frere Jacques theme which dominates the movement – with real mystery. We heard MSO at its best here, as other instruments and sections gradually picked up the theme and intensified the texture. The contrasting Klezmer-like section led by the brass with percussive col legno from the violins was excellent too.

The final movement is momentarily manic in nature and calls for much intensity. That is not to say it should let rip and in places this performance sounded less controlled than it needs to be although I really liked the grandiloquence achieved by the brass section.

It's a symphony which batters its listeners and demands enormous stamina from its players. No wonder Brian Wright looked exhausted at the end.

October 2018 - Susan Elkin / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

The opening concert in MSO's 108th season really belonged to young cellist, Maxim Calver. Aged only 18, he was a finalist in this year's BBC Young Musician of the Year and he stood in at short notice for the booked soloist.

Unusually he began, at conductor Brian Wright's request, with a solo piece – a variation, from a work by Lutoslawski commissioned by Rostopovitch and pretty dramatic it was too. He played this ambitious piece, complete with glissandi and quarter tones with intense insouciance.

Then, in place of Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto, it was on to a strikingly mature performance of Tchaikovsky's Variations on a Rococo Theme with the legato variations leaned on for maximum romance and the faster ones delivered with crisp witty aplomb. His use of harmonics is spectacular too.

And as if that weren't enough he then treated us to a richly nuanced encore – the very familiar but evergreen Sarabande from Bach's First Cello Suite. Thus, this engaging, poised young man who smiles though the music when his rapier eyes aren't staring into the distance, whizzed through the music of three centuries in less than an hour.

The concert began with Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* which is getting a number of outings this year to mark the centenary of the 1918 Armistice. It's a tricky work. You don't often see MSO front desk players visibly counting but they carried it off. The *Dies Irae* movement with the relentless rhythms ably underpinned by weighty percussion (seven in the section) was especially impressive and there was some lovely work from harpists, Milo Harper and Alex Tindall.

Pictures at an Exhibition, of course, as we now usually hear it owes as much to Ravel's orchestration as it does to Mussorgsky's original piano suite. In this intelligent performance Brian Wright allowed every soloist and solo section – some excellent playing here – to ensure that we noticed their contribution but without ever letting the piece feel bitty. It sailed along with warmth, fireworks and lots of colour. At the end Wright stood tuba player, Andy Bridges up first and quite right too. His solo was splendid as was Mike Austin's work on alto saxophone. And *The Great Gate of Kiev*, the final section, with those evocative tubular bells and cymbal clashes must have sent every member of the audience away with melody ringing in their heads.

Yes, the season is off to a fine start. Roll on 1st December.

May 2018 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

An all-Russian evening to end the season – and what a splendid season it has been as Peter Colman rightly notes, with an equally exciting programme in view for the autumn. The evening opened on familiar ground with Tchaikovsky's overture *Romeo and Juliet*. In his introductory remarks – always a welcome start to the evening – conductor Brian Wright had noted that the royal wedding was not in view when the programme was planned and he hoped that the outcome for the royal couple would be somewhat better than that for Shakespeare's lovers. The overture opened with a brooding tension which was held throughout, the emotional outpouring coming with all the intensity of snarling brass and rasping woodwind.

Prokofiev's *Third Piano Concerto* linked in quite well with the emotional power very much in evidence. Pianist Martin James Bartlett may have had an injury to his thumb but there was no evidence of this in the quality of his playing or the staccato, percussive attack he brought to his reading. The occasional romantic reflections become all the more effective in the midst of such challenging attacks on our senses. His encore, a gentle piece of Schumann, was all the more moving in the light of the contrast to the Prokofiev.

After the interval Shostakovich's *First Symphony* sat comfortably within this company. Its tongue-in-cheek opening movements were very well structured, with a strong sense of line and pace. Then came the bleakness of the third movement with its fine opening oboe solo and developing sense of depression. If the finale tries to overcome this darkness it only does so by fits and starts, and Brian Wright's approach left us wondering just how enthusiastic we should be about the bombast of the finale. For a student piece, this is amazing and makes us eager to hear how Shostakovich develops this near schizophrenic approach to composition in the later symphonies.

Conventional programme planning need not be a problem when the works are well balanced and well played – as they were at the Mote Hall last night. A classical symphony, a romantic concerto and a symphony which lies somewhere between the two – not that the opening symphony was quite what the title might imply. Mozart's Symphony No. 32 isn't – a symphony that is. It is probably an overture, and quite a clever composition as the final section mirrors the opening. There was considerable delicacy in the playing, given that the orchestra was probably far larger than the composer had available to him at the time, but the central section needs that intimacy and certainly got it here.

Violinist Benjamin Baker is well known to the Maidstone audience after his fine Bruch last year but was an unexpected visitor on this occasion as a late, but very welcome, replacement for Bartosz Woroch who was rightly detained by more immediate family matters.

The Brahms Violin Concerto was a richly romantic contrast to the opening Mozart with its rapid changes of tempi and emotional impact. Benjamin Baker negotiates these with finesse and a subtle portamento which is always pleasing. The first movement cadenza brought with it the hinted swagger of a Hungarian dance before the warmth of the *Adagio* – with exceptional oboe playing from David Montague – and the clipped, tightly rhythmic finale. Happily he is due to return next season for the Tchaikovsky concerto.

After the interval we heard Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony which sits on the top of the hill looking back to the classical while peering into the romantic future. Some years ago Leonard Bernstein argued that it was quite possible to hear the sixth symphony as a classical work if one can ignore the titles added to the movements. This was certainly true of Brian Wright's approach with its clean lines and clear sense of development. The strings had a wonderful sense of *cantabile* in the second movement without over-egging the romanticism.

The *Scherzo* starts off in classic form but the storm breaks the mould – almost literally given the intensity of Keith Price's timpani playing, and the whine of the piccolo – giving way to the only developed musicalline of the whole work in the final *Allegretto*. This was a very fine performance, musically well-paced as well as highly enjoyable.

"Now sits expectation in the air" as Shakespeare put it. Never in twenty years as a regular have I seen Mote Hall, Maidstone Leisure Centre as busily buzzy as it was when I arrived for this concert. I'd already queued for 20 minutes to drive into the car park. The hall was, unusually, full to capacity and there were far more under-20s present than Maidstone Symphony Orchestra generally attracts. The reason for all this excitement? Sheku Kanneh-Mason.

Attractively ordinary with his white shirt, silk waistcoat and fluffy Afro hair the 2016 winner of BBC Young Musician played the Elgar Concerto for the first time. Now 18, and in his first year at the Royal Academy, this charismatic young man, educated at a Nottingham comprehensive school, had me literally crouched on the edge of my seat for the entire concerto. Seated in the third row, I could hear him breathing the music from the opening, dramatic, sombre E minor chords through to the pained, wistful melodies of the *lento* and *adagio* movements and the drama of the final allegro. Has anyone played this concerto with more passion and anguish since Du Pré? It was both riveting and humbling to watch and listen to – and a great privilege to be present at what, I'm sure, will come to be regarded as a historic moment for classical music: the first time Sheku played the greatest, arguably, post-Bach work in the cello repertoire.

Interesting to reflect too that Elgar was 62 when this concerto premiered in 1919. I find it fascinating that every generation can throw up at least one brilliant young musician who can, with stunning technical

expertise, climb inside the tortured mind of an elderly gentleman whose beloved wife (she died five and a half months after the premiere) must already have been ill with lung cancer.

Well, the concerto was definitely the glittering jewel in the crown of this concert but Maidstone Symphony Orchestra shone in the rest of the programme too. Berlioz's *King Lear* overture doesn't enjoy many outings but, engaging piece as it is, it sang out dramatically on this occasion. Brian Wright ensured that we appreciated the quasi melody Berlioz affords the timpanist (Keith Price) and David Montague's accomplished oboe work which represents Cordelia – sweet and lyrical amidst all the discordance and busy playing – was a high spot.

After a very long interval – during which Sheku was, with great charm, unhurriedly signing CDs, posing for photographs with admirers and generally making classical music “cool” – it was time for Dvorak's *New World* Symphony. Brian Wright took the whole work at a nippy speed and I don't think it was just because we were running late. It needs to move to come alive.

He is awfully good at allowing woodwind and brass detail to come through and of course, for irrepressibly exuberant Dvorak that's even more important than for some other composers. So we got lovely dynamic contrasts in the opening movement, a beautifully played cor anglais (Jane Walker) theme in the *largo* against well balanced muted strings and a very lilting *scherzo* which danced along through all its mood swings and key changes. And as for the *allegro con fuoco* finale, there was certainly lots of pleasing, fiery “fuoco”. The brass section did exceptionally well here and the very fast “folksy” string passages were admirably incisive.

December 2017 - Susan Elkin / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

The Flying Dutchman overture – always a good warm up piece for both audience and orchestra – got us off to a strong start with its energetic opening. Brian Wright ensured that we enjoyed all that Wagnerian brass and busy string work and the slight roughness in the more exposed *Andante* section didn't matter much.

Then it was on to Strauss's sparky, melodious 1946 *Oboe Concerto*. There's an elfin quality about Olivier Stankiewicz, a Frenchman, both in his playing and his appearance. The mature Strauss understood exactly how to exploit the instrument whose small reed allows for few breaths and long phrases and Stankiewicz gave us a lot of lyricism and seamless creamy sound especially in the beautiful *Andante*. Brian Wright is, as ever, very good at supporting soloists and here he achieved an elegant balance between orchestra and oboe.

Ralph Vaughan Williams's vibrant *Second Symphony* is an aural portrait of London hailing from just before the First World War. It's a work of many moods and modes, requiring large forces and it's good to see a battery of young percussionists playing, among many other things, several sorts of cymbal. By now the orchestra was totally in its stride and the precision of the muted strings beneath the horn and trumpet in the ethereal minor key melody in the *Lento* was a delight. So was the resolute string sound in the *Nocturne*. And the control in the very evocative epilogue, as everything dies away to silence at the end, was a great credit to the conductor.

Two other players deserve a special mention. Ben Knowles, principal viola, had a lot to do. Vaughan Williams loved the viola and gives it solo spots in his *Second Symphony* as well as leading more than once with the viola section. There's nice solo viola passages in the Strauss too. And it all came off with aplomb in this concert. Knowles well deserved the special front-of-stage acknowledgement Brian Wright gave him at the end. Second, full marks to the harpist, Jane Lister, who substituted at the eleventh hour for a player who had mistaken the date. She raced in with her harp five minutes before the concert was due to start and went on to do a grand job.

The new season is built around a series of concerti all of which will be performed by young professionals, often at the start of what we hope will be long careers.

For this first concert, Savitri Grier was the eloquent soloist for Mendelssohn's ever popular *Violin Concerto*, finding a gentle melancholy in the opening passages but a real sense of bite in the cadenza and unexpected sweetness in the unfolding melody of the slow movement. Brian Wright's approach to the work was more reflective than is often the case, with a greater sense of waltz rhythms in the slow movement and introspection in the first. Any shadows were however blown away with the sparkle of the fleet finale, hinting throughout at the other world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The concerto was sandwiched between two Russian masterpieces, opening with Shostakovich's *Festive Overture*, a riot of colour and a tour de force for the brass. Written at great speed for the 37th anniversary of the Revolution, it is never quite clear how tongue in cheek it actually is – not that that affects our enjoyment.

After the interval we were presented with Rachmaninov's *Second Symphony*. One of the problems with the popularity of the two central movements is that we rarely hear them in context, and the long unwinding of the first movement demands considerably more attention than either the *Allegro molto* or the *Adagio*. There is also the reality that the composer's style and orchestration has been regularly high-jacked by the film industry to the point where the original can sound derivative. Thankfully the orchestra's playing and the skillful direction from the podium kept us on our toes and alive to the every shifting pattern that Rachmaninov creates for us on what is a long and often complex journey, before the exhilaration of the finale.

May 2017 - Susan Elkin / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

There was a lot of B Minor in this concert and it's a good key for plangency especially in the dying notes of Tchaikovsky's valedictory masterpiece, the Sixth Symphony. Brian Wright held his orchestra and the audience in rapt tense suspension at the very end of the concert, and the MSO season, before finally dropping his baton to tumultuous applause. It was an appropriate end in another way too as this concert was dedicated to a much loved and much missed veteran, cellist Margaret Chapman who died last month, after 65 years of playing with MSO. She played her last concert with them in February.

At other points in Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, Brian Wright achieved a good balance between the manic energy (terrific work from brass and percussion) of the *Allegro* which forms the second half of the first movement and the delicacy of the unsettling five-in-a-bar *con grazia* second movement. The *molto vivace* movement packed all of the resounding energy it requires.

Earlier in the evening Michael Petrov, a charismatic Bulgarian who smiles warmly at the orchestra when he is enjoying their playing, gave us a nicely judged account of the Dvorak cello concerto – more B minor. In the slow lyrical section of the first movement he had the cello itself almost weeping but because this is Dvorak that has to be offset against all those sparky cheerful melodies – and it was. The *allegro* finale was dramatic, lively and beautifully played. I shall long treasure Petrov's sensitive duet with MSO leader Andrew Pearson in that movement.

It isn't easy to start a programme with Mussorgsky's *Night on the Bare Mountain* which has a lot of exposed work and is hardly a "warm up" piece. On this occasion MSO really hit the ground running with a very assured, entertaining rendering. The string sound wove in well around the brass blasts and Anna Binney's tender, warm flute solo at the end was outstanding.

This performance was heralded as a Charity Concert in support of the High Sheriff of Kent's charity *Oasis*, managing to combine an evening of wonderful music-making with support for an essential cause – working to end domestic violence and abuse. The High Sheriff, Mrs Kathrin Smallwood, was present along with a clutch of worthies all wearing their respective chains and badges of office. I hope they enjoyed the event as much as the regular members of the audience for there was certainly a great deal to enjoy.

The evening opened with the overture to Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*. This demonstrated the real strengths of the string section, starting as it does with the second violins and frequently drawing on them to lead. The fluidity and sense of close ensemble across the strings is now exceptionally high as this proved.

Amy Harman was the soloist for Mozart's Bassoon Concerto K191 and gave us a gently mellifluous interpretation which sat comfortably across the lighter orchestration. Mozart only uses strings, horns and oboes, so that the deeper tones of the bassoon are allowed to flourish by themselves, producing a warm depth of tone in contrast to the brighter sounds of the accompaniment. In the final *Rondo* Mozart leaves the main theme for the soloist until the very end, concentrating instead on a heady cloud of ornamentation which Amy Harman brought off with both skill and charm.

It was a pity that – due to personal circumstances – she was not able to bring us the original second item, but in the event it was possibly our gain as we experienced one of the finest renditions of *Finlandia* I have heard in many a year. The growling brass brought a sense of menace and fire to the opening and the tamps were splendidly aggressive throughout – much thanks to Keith Price. One could sense the swell of hatred towards the Russians as Finland sought its independence. The great final hymn came across as a sign of thanksgiving in anticipation – this was after all seventeen years before the independence whose anniversary is celebrated this year – and the finale was genuinely thrilling.

If the glories of Sibelius' Second Symphony did not quite match the thrill of *Finlandia* it was certainly no reflection on the performance itself. The opening of the first movement may still hark back to Tchaikovsky in its string writing but it soon moves towards a starker voice which we know is pure Sibelius. The biting woodwind and bleakness carry over into the second movement where the sun peeps out occasionally but is as soon lost to sight. It is not until the fury of the third movement that we feel there is some hope – a hope gloriously vindicated in the finale with its soaring flights of brass and a sense that dogged determination will win out in the end – as it did.

John Lill CBE has been president of the Maidstone Symphony Orchestra since 1980 and his association with it goes ten years further back when he played his first concert with them, shortly after winning the Tchaikovsky Piano Competition. To this day, he generously plays an occasional concert with MSO and unassuming as he is, his presence in the hall has a palpable effect on both players and audience. He seems to bring out an extra edge in a band which always delivers competently but on this occasion they surpassed even their own high standards.

Lill's account of Beethoven's third piano concerto was unshowy but intense, the concentration showing only in a slight working of his mouth. It's a treat to hear the concerto played at a speed which allows us to hear every note of Beethoven's glorious C minor detail – a refreshing contrast to the usual *prestissimo* gallop most conductors want to impose on it. The triplets just before the end came across in this performance as an intelligent question and answer dialogue between piano and orchestra. Other high spots included the long cadenza full of virtuosic tension at the end of the first movement, which had me (and most of the rest the audience) on the edge of our seats, and the exquisite lyricism in the *largo*.

The Beethoven was sandwiched between Weber's chirpy *Oberon* overture and Brahms's most magnificent

symphony – the Fourth and last. The Weber presents a challenging opening with its horn solo and muted strings – all very exposed before it leaps away into the first dance tune. It isn't the easiest way to start a concert but it came off most adequately.

And by the time we reached the vibrant warmth of the Brahms, all nervousness had gone and the John Lill effect had worked its magic. From the exuberant precision of the opening *allegro* through the delicacy (all that pizzicato!) in the middle movement to the initially ponderous, grandiloquent fourth movement, it was glorious. I once heard the late, great Antony Hopkins (the musicologist not the actor) give a talk for children about this last movement and he told them to remember “B-R-A-H-M-S Spells Brahms” and explained how to listen for the opening statement in various forms for the rest of the movement. If only there had been more children and young people in the audience at this concert to hear this enjoyable account of it.

For various reasons this was the first MSO concert I've managed to get to this season and I'm struck afresh by the quality and freshness. I think it is scaling new heights of achievement. Andrew Pearson is certainly the most charismatic leader the orchestra has had in a while and I'm sure he is part of the reason. The string sound is rich and rarely falters and – among other fine performers – Anna Binney, principal flautist – more than deserved the applause Brian Wright directed towards her at the end.

December 2016 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Warm romantic music for a chilly winter's evening. A very popular programme brought a large number to the Mote Hall, enhanced no doubt by the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Heart of Kent Hospice.

Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro for Strings* is indelibly linked for many of us to Ken Russell's film for *Monitor* in 1962 and the boy on the white horse sweeping across the Malvern Hills. All of this came back in the richness of tone from the combined strings as they launched into the work, and then the sudden haunting delicacy of the solo viola. Have the strings ever sounded better? They certainly were on wonderful form and their new leader Andrew Pearson seems to have added a new enthusiasm to their playing.

Bruch's Violin Concerto (yes of course there is more than one but the first has a head start!) is still regularly at the top of Classic FM's *Hall of Fame* but whereas many works can seem jaded by regular repetition, the Bruch never seems to do so. Here again it had a freshness and immediacy which was compelling. Much of this was down to Benjamin Baker's playing. Brian Wright has a wonderful knack of finding us young soloists on the cusp of international stardom, and surely here was another. Having recently won the First Prize at the Young Concert Artists Final Audition Awards in New York, he is due to give a series of major concerts across the USA next season. Sensing the unassuming authority he brings to the Bruch it is no wonder he won. There is nothing showy, no histrionics, simply the purest of music making and an immaculate sense of line and fluidity. The 1709 Tononi violin which he plays radiates the most beautiful tone, easily riding the full orchestra, and where appropriate seducing us with hushed, almost imperceptible phrasing.

It was a masterly performance but also served to show what a masterpiece the concerto itself is, standing up to any number of repeats, day after day. As a well-deserved encore he played the *Sarabande* and *Gigue* from Bach's solo violin Partita No2 BWV 1004 – as far removed from Bruch as one could imagine, and sublimely performed.

If Schumann's *Rhenish* Symphony did not hit quite the same heights it was understandable, though there was much very fine playing and the horn section in particular impressed. Brian Wright takes a taught, muscular approach to the opening movement, almost hard edged at times, though avoiding any chance of sentimentality. The contrasting undulations of the second movement were well found as were the dancelike measures of the third. The change in atmosphere for the austere fourth movement impressed, allowing us to emerge into the sunlight for the finale, and the sparkle of the Rhine itself.

The weather may have taken a turn for the worse but there was no doubting the enthusiasm of Maidstone Symphony Orchestra who seemed to have retained all the warmth and joy of the summer, in an evening full of romantic extravagance.

Brian Wright opened with a thrilling reading of Dvorak's *Carnival Overture*, the delicacy of the harp fending off the brashness of the brass and the thwack of the tambourine. Shostakovich's Second Piano Concerto followed with Alexander Panfilov its vibrant soloist. He brought a highly percussive approach to the work which was both exciting and convincing, though he has all the subtlety for the familiar *Andante* slow movement. The fire he brought to his reading was mirrored in the Rachmaninov Prelude which he gave as an encore. We would happily have asked for more but that would not have been fair on him after the exertions of the concerto.

Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* is equally familiar and gained in authority as it progressed. There was sound dynamic contrast in the first two movements, with the two harps particularly impressive, but it was from the third movement that it really began to impress. From the offstage oboe to the sinister drum rolls at the end it was beautifully phrased in long, lingering paragraphs.

I don't normally mention soloists by name but the two tympanists, William Burgess and George Barton, really stood out in the final movements. The *March to the Scaffold* had an intensity and power which came to fruition in the finale movement, where textures were crystal clear even in the density of Berlioz's orchestration.

If the orchestra can maintain this level of musicality for the rest of the season we are in for a fantastic year.

May 2016 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

What a splendid end to a splendid season! The all Russian programme looked sound on paper and proved to be so in execution. Borodin may have technically been an amateur but there is nothing un-professional about his ability to spin a musical line or summon up an oriental atmosphere. Maybe some of the colour

we hear in the overture to *Prince Igor* has as much to do with Glazunov who completed the work as with Borodin but the final effect is as highly charged as one could wish for. Alongside the arch romanticism of the melodies we had the fine nuances of tone colour which demonstrated the strengths of the orchestra's individual departments, and on this occasion highlighted some rousing fanfares.

If Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto takes a little getting used to it is, as Brian Wright noted in his introduction, well worth the effort. The second movement in particular is immediately accessible to anybody who knows *Romeo & Juliet* and there is a great deal of the ballet latent within this score. Callum Smart showed a deep and intimate understanding of the work, bringing out the contrasts between the sudden moments of gentle lyricism and the brashness which comes to a head in the final movement. Quirky and challenging it may be, but with a performance as engaging as this, it more than justifies its place in the season.

Brian Wright argued that from his point of view Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony is his finest. On the strength of this performance he could well be right! This was surely the best playing we have heard all year and a tribute to the quality of the orchestra both as an ensemble and as individual soloists. The limpid clarinet solo at the start, the subtle vibrato from the solo horn in the second movement – suggesting a slight hesitancy, a whistling in the dark – and the lovely bassoon lines, all reflected the individual quality of the players. At the same time the precision and warmth of the strings was better

than I recall it before. Perhaps the exigencies of rehearsing the Mahler Ninth for the previous concert had made a deep impact?

March 2016 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

In his introduction Brian Wright noted that the concert was book-ended by *Adagios*. While this was technically true the difference between the two could hardly have been greater. The evening opened with the lush warmth of Barber's *Adagio for Strings* which brought richness without ever becoming over romantic. Precise intonation was a harbinger of excellence to come.

As if to give us a little light relief Paul Beniston joined the orchestra as the soloist in Arutiunian's Trumpet Concerto. I have to admit that in all my years as a music critic this was the first time I had heard the work and it certainly sparkles with a mischievous intensity. While there are hints of Shostakovich in the astringency of much of the writing it also has the romantic washes of sound and colour we associate with Rimsky-Korsakov or Khachaturian. It is not afraid of melody either, and so lies easy on the ear even at a first hearing. Paul Beniston was obviously enjoying himself and his enthusiasm was catching not only for the audience but the soloists in the orchestra, with some particularly fine solo passages for clarinet.

Mahler's Ninth Symphony is an Everest for the finest orchestras in the world. For Maidstone to tackle it may seem like foolishness but the attempt paid off with many passages of splendid authority. If the opening of the first movement seemed tentative, the first climax galvanised the large forces and brought a thrilling intensity which set a mark for the rest of the performance. The brass produced the raw power Mahler calls for, the first trumpet piercing the hall with its ringing steel. The hushed intimacy of the many bridge passages impressed as the structure gradually unfolded.

The rustic opening of the second movement seemed unusually slow but gathered in pace as the score progressed. Balance in this movement was cleaner than it had been in the first and there was a crispness to the sound which added to the impact. The woodwind rasped its way through the third movement as the score moves towards a chaos which is not easy on the listener but an essential part of the journey. The movement built to a splendid climactic crisis before the gentler pace of the final *Adagio*. Here we found warmth and steadfastness with a courage to endure. The acid world of shrieking wind and brass are gone and in the magical final pages we sense a striving for a conclusion which remains ever elusive – it recalls the end of *Das Lied von der Erde*, a fade into oblivion.

Brian Wright was either inspired or close to insane putting the work in this year's programme but in the event proved that, for all the challenges, it was worth the effort. Players may have been stretched to the limit yet proved themselves more than capable of overcoming the rigours of Mahler's writing to produce a memorable and moving performance.

January 2016 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

This may not have been the coldest of winters but the long grey days seem to have been with us for an eternity. It was an inspired choice therefore on Brian Wright's part to open this darkest of concerts with the full glory of Nielsen's Overture *Helios*. Written when the Danish composer was living in Greece, it traces a full day in the life of the sun, opening with the deep C major chord which seems to reflect the open innocence of the sun for so many composers. There was a nobility to the playing, particularly from the horns who experienced many exposed passages across the evening and acquitted themselves with honour. Also worthy of note was the solo piccolo whose brightness draws us to the full brilliance of the sun before it starts to sink into its gentle rest.

An early Mozart piano concerto might seem a long way away from Greece but the clarity and lightness of touch which Martin James Bartlett brought to it was entirely convincing. Earlier that day he had been in

Hamburg, playing for an International Piano Competition, but there was no sense of this being the end of a very long day in the enthusiasm and care he brought to the piano concerto No12 in A K414. It may be an early piece but the *Andante* is a mature and sensitive composition which drew even greater insight from the young pianist. He gave us a scintillating encore (Poulenc's Toccata, No.3 of Three Pieces, Op.2) which was certainly well deserved.

Brian Wright argued that Dvorak's Seventh Symphony is his finest and I have to agree in its complexity and muscularity, both of which the orchestra demonstrated with their usual aplomb. The shadow of Brahms is ever present but where the elder composer can become Teutonic ally weighty Dvorak manages to see the sun even when it is behind the clouds. The third movement danced with a Czech vitality though the writing is significantly complex, and the final movement returned us to the nobility we had caught in the Nielsen at the start of the evening.

A splendid way to drive out winter greyness – and a pleasure to see far more in the audience than at the end of last year!

November 2015 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

A highly demanding programme for the orchestra and one not without its challenges for the audience. Brian Wright brought together four late romantic works which complemented each other with their respective approaches to narrative. All four take us on a journey, some more overtly picturesque than others, but nothing that could be called abstract.

Richard Strauss' *Don Juan* is a case in point. It may not follow Byron in any literal sense but the episodes and emotional turmoil of the Don's life are clearly displayed for us. If the strings seemed a little thin at the start they soon gained courage and by the end brought us the lush richness Strauss requires. There was some splendid playing from the horn section, and throughout the sense of pace and tone colour was finely etched.

It was a real pleasure to welcome back Laura van der Heijden as soloist in Walton's Cello Concerto. It was with this work she won the BBC Young Musician of the Year in 2012, and in the intervening years her approach has deepened and gained an even more captivating warmth. Where Walton's orchestral writing can be quirky and strident, the solo line is always approachable. She brought a joyous spontaneity to the second movement and led us through the more introvert solo passages of the final movement with ease and conviction. It was a privilege to hear her again. Maybe there are plans for another of the great cello concerti in future?

Albert Roussel is hardly a household name but the suite from his ballet *The Spider's Banquet* is more than just a charming rarity. The writing sits comfortably between Debussy's romantic web-spinning and the intensity of early Stravinsky. I don't think it is taking things too far to suggest that Roussel has passages that are remarkably like *The Rite of Spring* in their insistent rhythms and attack. Of course, unlike the Stravinsky, they do not last but they are certainly there. Brian Wright drew our attention to these even as we easily followed the story of the ballet itself, and the life and death of the insects.

In The South is Elgar at his most extrovert and the concert overture sits well beside Strauss' *Don Juan*. There is little of English melancholy here and a great deal of extravagant rushing about. There are many passages that look towards the scherzo of the Second Symphony in the frenetic energy which is required from the players and listeners. Yet at the heart of the work is the melting viola solo – wonderfully played by David Hesketh – which could only be by Elgar. A splendid evening – would that there had been even more there to enjoy it.

October 2015 - Susan Elkin / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

An ambitious and meaty all-Russian programme – comprising three works all written within 50 years – got the first concert of the Maidstone Symphony Orchestra season off to a resounding start. And the star of the evening was most definitely Taek-Gi Lee, 19, whose approach to the notoriously challenging Rachmaninov third piano concerto was intense rather than passionate and that meant measured, poised, extraordinarily mature and thoughtful playing for one so young especially in the spectacular first movement cadenza, the luxuriant velvety adagio and the dramatic dive into the finale. Slight, straight-backed and immaculate in neatly buttoned dark suit Lee wowed the audience with oodles of technical prowess – small hands and lithe fingers often moving in a rapid blur – and, afterwards with boyish modesty. Brian Wright, always musically very supportive of young soloists, ensured that the orchestra provided a well balanced accompaniment despite the tricky bittiness of so many of the interjections, some of which occasionally lacked finesse.

The concerto was sandwiched between three dances, including the Sabre Dance from Khachaturian's Gayane, and, after the interval Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade. The raw excitement of the familiar Sabre Dance worked its high speed magic with xylophone and woodwind going full tilt and strings vamping.

Scheherazade requires huge forces and we got them – six percussionists, harp and additional brass and woodwind. Rimsky-Korsakov was an outstandingly good orchestrator. Brian Wright knows better than to resort to musical histrionics. Instead he allowed his players – especially the flute, piccolo and trumpets – to find and run with all those lovely orchestral colours and tonal contrasts. I shall long treasure, for example, that exquisite passage in the opening movement in which a bassoon melody is underpinned by a long low note from double basses. And it's a real treat to hear those sorts of details coming through with clarity. At the same time there's a lot of rich long-bowed string work in *Scheherazade* and this performance did it real justice. Orchestra leader Robin Brightman played the violin solos sensitively too (in duet with cellist Angela Migden at times) with his harmonics at the very end leading at least two people sitting near me to marvel aloud.

May 2015 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Shostakovich's *Leningrad* Symphony is a challenge for the most professional of orchestras and it was a fitting tribute to their fine season that Maidstone Symphony Orchestra was able to field over a hundred musicians with such a high level of professionalism.

Brian Wright created a secure sense of ensemble even when the score was at its most dynamic, not to say bombastic, allowing the changes of mood to flow with ease while maintaining the dramatic tension which underpins the whole score. Even the more reflective moments – with some splendid solo playing from the woodwind – are held in check by the sense of the fight to come. The two brass sections were demonstrably up to the challenge and flared with thrilling impact.

The evening had opened with Tchaikovsky's first Piano Concerto with Alexandra Dariescu as soloist. While it was very enthusiastically received by the audience I have to admit to some doubts – though not about the technical skill of the performer. While the work calls for a bravura approach, which she certainly gave it, there are also many lyrical passages which call for a more introspective touch if only to give a balance to the more extravagant and extrovert writing. Brian Wright was a sensitive accompanist here, keeping with the soloist even when she took over the tempi and moved it more rapidly than the tempo the orchestra had set.

March 2015 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

The Spring Equinox seemed to have encouraged a new level of risk taking for Maidstone Symphony Orchestra in a programme which may be familiar but is fraught with potential pit-falls. The evening opened

with a breezy account of Berlioz's overture *Le Corsaire*, the strings skittish but under tight rhythmic control and the brass enjoying the fanfares of the conclusion.

It was good to welcome back Bartosz Woroch as the soloist in Elgar's violin concerto. After the brash orchestral opening his first solo line was touchingly melancholic though with warmth and depth which promised a reading of great intimacy. The final movement burst on us with passion, the various strands gradually coming together for a hushed and highly introvert semi-cadenza before the wistful conclusion. A splendid, if rightly challenging, performance from soloist and orchestra.

Brian Wright takes a dynamic and extrovert approach to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The tempi are fast and there are no pauses to take a breath. At times it seems almost reckless yet the players never lost confidence in their ability to meet the challenge. Solo playing was excellent and let me draw attention to bassoonist, Philip Le Bas. Beethoven writes wonderful solo lines for bassoon, too often overlooked, but not so here as they were all so mellifluously effective. Similarly Keith Price, using beaters with very small heads, created an *original-instruments* intensity from the timpani. The crescendo opening the final movement was splendidly controlled before the extended passage in C major blazed around us – the brass once more wallowing in the joy of the moment.

January 2015 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Flautist Harry Winstanley may have been introduced as *local boy makes good* but there is nothing remotely domestic about his international reputation or his technical prowess. Nor is he limited to performing. The first half of the concert was built around two substantial and challenging works for flute and orchestra, the first of which, Paul Taffanel's *Fantasy on themes from Weber's Der Freischütz* had been orchestrated for this performance by Harry Winstanley himself. It is a sensitive arrangement, thinning out Weber's orchestra so as not to overwhelm the soloist but retaining just enough brass to allow significant impact in climaxes. The work opens with Agathe's *Leise, leise fromme Weise* and wends its way through to Ännchen's *Einst träumte meiner*. On the way the flautist indulges in increasingly elaborate ornamentation like a Bel-canto Diva on a benefit evening. It was intoxicating and hugely enjoyable.

Carl Nielsen's Flute Concerto is equally demanding of the soloist and makes even more demands of the audience. There is a constant tension between the soloist and the orchestra which changes moment to moment in emotional intensity and melodic invention. At one time the flautist seems to be trying to calm the orchestra whereas at others they seem to be forcing him to go into areas his gentle, almost naïve musical line clearly does not want to pursue. The introduction of the snarling trombone at the end leaves us with a lurking doubt as to just how seriously we should take the work. Maybe we should just sit back and enjoy it and not worry about the journey?

After the interval we were in much safer territory with Dvorak's sixth symphony. The influence of Brahms is obvious throughout but this is Brahms with a smile on his face and the Czech folk influence is never far from the surface. The brass are very exposed but proved themselves more than worthy of the challenge with ringing fanfares at both ends of the work. There is a gentle optimism in the slow movement which was supported by rich string playing and occasional darker moments passed quickly as the woodwind bring back the sunshine. The *scherzo* was furiously driven like a whirling folk dance throughout and brought us to the melodic delights of the finale, Brian Wright maintaining a lightness and sense of joy throughout.

November 2014 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Brian Wright was quite correct in his thinking that the programme of works this evening epitomised both the planning and strengths of the orchestra. What might appear to be a conventional set of items – Suite, Concerto, Symphony – brought a number of specific challenges both for the players and the audience, and a soloist of international acclaim.

Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* may seem very familiar but its rhythmic complexities and solo lines are traps for the unwary. The hushed, almost sultry, opening lulls us into a false sense of ease which is

gently dispelled as dawn breaks. The playing had a slight rawness to it which was in keeping with the integrity of the score. This is not a sentimental work but a vision of the openness, both physically and spiritually, of a community prior to mass industrialisation and urbanisation. Copland looks back with his eyes open even if nostalgia creeps in.

It should be difficult to follow but Giovanni Guzzo's handling of the Brahms' violin concerto was so captivating it almost made us overlook the start. He produced a radiant sweetness of tone, across the full range of his Stradivarius, but no violin is as important as the quality of the musician playing it. The orchestra rose to the challenge of his playing, producing a bite and pulse which supported the clarity of his phrasing. The second movement seemed faster than usual moving the music forward with a subtle passion and heading us into the joyful exuberance of the finale.

Vaughan Williams' Fourth Symphony may have been written ten years before the Copland but it has all the shock of the new. The terror explodes from the opening bars and the intensity of the writing never lets up. The slow movement may be quieter but it never smiles, and even when the Scherzo arrives, the outward sign is more a grimace than a greeting. The marches of the final movement prefigure Shostakovich and have all of his doubled-edged attack. Is there any hope here? Not a lot. Is this a vision of the future or a man distracted by the building of the Dorking by-pass? In the end neither matter for the symphony, played with remarkably tight control of its rhythms and some fine solo playing, is a massive outpouring of pain in a world which seems to be running out of control.

October 2014 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

A comfortably full Mote Hall greeted the new season for the Maidstone Symphony Orchestra. When subsidies and sponsorship are so difficult to come by these days it is a pleasure to realise that the series is able to continue almost entirely as a result of the generous support of individuals and the enthusiasm of the audience.

The opening concert may have seemed conventional in its planning – an overture, a concerto, a symphony. There was, however, more to it than this as Brian Wright pointed out in his introduction. Tae-Hyung Kim not only won the Hastings International Piano Competition in 2013 but was playing in Russia immediately before flying in for the Maidstone concert.

Wagner may look like the odd one out but the romanticism of the overture to *Tannhäuser* was happily in keeping with the early Tchaikovsky symphony. The strings impressed in the *Venusberg* music and the horns were resplendent at the end. Balance was excellent throughout in a piece which can easily fall apart as the counter-point becomes more complex.

Tae-Hyung Kim had won the Hastings competition playing Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto and he performed this for us last night. His approach appears quite cool to the onlooker. There are no histrionics or mannerisms to detract from the score, yet his impact on the ear is very finely focused. He made a very strong opening statement, creating subtle contrasts in the more reflective passages. The second movement was particularly delicately phrased before a bravura launch into the final *Rondo*. Here the humour was allowed to shine through and the dance-like forms were never far away.

Tchaikovsky's early symphonies suffer, like Dvorak's, from the over-popularity of the later ones. As a result *Winter Daydreams*, Tchaikovsky's first symphony, is still rarely heard, though as Brian Wright demonstrated it is a fine work.

The opening movement is clearly the voice of Tchaikovsky and the Russian themes flow throughout. Darker moments which well up from nowhere were ever present but the light is never put out. The second movement opens as if it was part of the *Serenade for Strings* but then moves to a more pastoral feel with the solo wind. Suddenly a long lyrical line unfolds, as if the composer could not hold it in any longer. The same is true for the Scherzo where the central movement which would normally be a trio is a flood of lyricism which could easily sit in any of the later works. After a sombre opening the final movement bursts with Schumannesque vitality and draws on the full brass section.

The orchestra is privileged to have such fine solo players and to create such a firm body of sound in its larger departments.

May 2014 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Arriving at the Mote Hall in daylight, with no need to avoid muddy puddles or half-hidden pavements, it must be the end of the season – and what a season it has been. The range of works we have heard and the quality of the soloists has yet again demonstrated the vigour and talent of the orchestra as a whole and the dynamic strength of Brian Wright's leadership.

The final concert brought us firmly into the early twentieth century with the upheaval of jazz and ragtime, which seemed to permeate all of the works we heard. Ravel's *Suite, Mother Goose* served as a gentle hors d'oeuvre with the piquancy of *Laideronnette* a highlight at its heart.

The benefit of the flat floor is that it allows for the rapid placement of the piano and how pleasing to see and hear a full grand Schimmel. Pianist Tom Poster obviously relished the range of tonal qualities he could coax from it and his performance of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was masterly and absorbing. Brian Wright took a somewhat relaxed approach to the opening pages – there was no hint of the Big Band here, rather the heady influence of jazz on a committed classical composer. Time and again individual soloists tried to break free into ragtime or jazz riffs, only to be gently contained within the orchestral format. The tension was compelling and the overall effect highly exciting.

If Ravel's *Bolero* is somewhat over-familiar then hearing live can come as something of a shock. Ravel's orchestration is very sensitive and looking at the orchestra one is aware of the tiny moments of support given by individual instruments, moments which go unheard when simply listening to a CD or worse still on the car radio. I noted the harp in the very early sections, plucking individual notes and then, later, the upper wind doing the same. Each adding, little by little, to the texture we are experiencing. That the orchestra has such accomplished musicians is a tribute to them and this whole evening drew on their strengths.

After the interval Tom Poster returned for Ravel's Piano Concerto. Possibly the least familiar piece in the programme, the quieter, introspective passages were particularly impressive with a lovely section for piano and harp. The brass came into their own later in the work, seeming to be warming up for the following Gershwin. The jazz elements, always latent across the evening, exploded in the last movement bringing the whole to a joyous conclusion.

The evening, and the season, came to a brash conclusion with Gershwin's *An American in Paris*. Brian Wright found an effective balance between the sentimental and the raucous, encouraging his players to give of their all.

March 2014 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Bartosz Woroch flew in a few hours before the concert on Saturday, having played in public the two previous evenings in Poland. One would never have guessed this from the sensitivity and élan he brought to Beethoven's violin concerto. The high lying passages had a particular sweetness of tone and the first movement cadenza's warm double-stopping was captivating.

Brian Wright took a relaxed approach to the opening movement, with Bartosz Woroch seemingly more tense than the first violins, but as the musical line developed so he appeared to become more at ease and by the first long trill was working in harmony with the rest of the strings rather than at odds with them. It was a very convincing approach and led us into a heady reading of the slow movement. There were times when the circling upwards phrases were more like Vaughan Williams than Beethoven, and

the hushed accompaniment mirrored this. The final movement danced with a lightness of touch in all areas.

After the interval we moved into the vast spaces of Sibelius' 5th Symphony. There was a slight rawness to the wind in the opening sections and an edginess to the horns, both in keeping with the uncertainty of direction which is sensed in the strings as they plough ahead regardless. Then suddenly the sun comes out, radiant joy spread throughout the orchestra and, even when the clouds return, there is never a loss of that underlying sense of purpose. Brian Wright captured this dichotomy with ease and shaped the long paragraphs with skill. The end of the first movement was genuinely triumphant. The gentler second movement brought warm wind and concise string playing, before the final movement trembled into life. Horns and trumpets were both accurate and noble in the final sections, bringing the evening to a rounded and satisfying close.

January 2014 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

There was, unexpectedly, a close romantic link between the four works we heard at the Mote Hall last night. Not a sentimental, St Valentine's, romanticism but the emotional intensity which came from the Romantic Movement and lasted well into the 20th century.

It is there in every bar of Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture*. We can almost close our eyes and sniff up the ozone as we indulge in the rapidly changing moods of the sea. Yet this is a beneficent ocean, exciting but never threatening even as it hurls us into the waves. The composer's experience is closer to the cruise passenger than the surfer. All of this was well caught in the ebb and flow of the dynamics, with hazy strings giving way to bright edged wind.

The open-air thrill of the ocean gave way to the melancholy of Sibelius' *Valse triste*. Here the strings remain deep within a dark memory, with only the flute and clarinet solos lifting us out of the presence of death. It was moving and uncomfortable at the same time.

Emma Johnson made a welcome return, and even more so with her captivating reading of Finzi's Clarinet Concerto. Though written in 1949 the first two movements breathe late Elgar both in the introspection of the writing and the air of melancholy. The wistful second movement, with its limpid, rising melody gradually gives way to hope as the clarinet urges the strings into more open and optimistic realms. The relationship between soloist and strings was splendidly captured throughout, leading to the final *Rondo* whose folk-like melody suddenly moves us into the later twentieth century.

The second half took us from the melancholy of Sibelius and Finzi back to the heroism inherent in Mendelssohn. Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony revisits familiar material in the final movement which the composer had long associated with Napoleon, and while he might have distanced himself once Napoleon crowned himself Emperor, there is no doubting the heroic nature of the symphony. Brian Wright brought out the dance-like quality of the score in many passages, lightening the textures and allowing the solo lines to shine through. David Montague's oboe was particularly effective in the second movement, but there were no problems with the woodwind throughout. The horns distinguished themselves with the variety of tone produced, ranging from the wild hunting calls of the *Scherzo* to the softer introspection of the funeral march.

A fine evening – or should I say, another fine evening.

November 2013 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

Brian Wright obviously enjoys challenging both his players and his audience. Last night's concert at the Mote Hall brought us a club sandwich with chunky crusts and a fascinating filling. The orchestra blazed into action with Berlioz' Overture *Roman Carnival*, with the brass and woodwind indulging themselves in the composer's enthusiasm, but not before a limpid cor anglais solo from David Montague. The

strings were more than up to the extravagance of the final pages putting everyone in a good mood for the following concerto.

Reinhold Glière is hardly a household name and his horn concerto, though loved by those who know it, is not frequently performed. Tom Bettley was advertised as a *local boy* but there is nothing domestic about his approach to the work or to his professionalism as a soloist. Glière spent time studying with a professional horn player before completing the work and this shows in the challenges he provides for the soloist. Not only are there some formidable technical passages in the outer movements but the long lyrical sections are equally difficult, and it was these which were particularly impressive. The *Andante* has a Tchaikovsky-like melodic line which wanders with great beauty – a beauty finely crafted in Tom Bettley's gentle and mellifluous playing. By the end it was easy to see why players love the work – perhaps we might learn to if we heard it more often.

After the interval the orchestra brought us two large-scale romantic works, commencing with Richard Strauss' *Tod und Verklärung*. The opening section caught the timelessness of the piece with ease, the long string passages unfolding with skill and great sensitivity. Brian Wright maintained the tension here, creating a fine balance between anxiety and ennui. The double climax was splendidly phrased and the strings were at their best in the outpouring of joy in the final pages.

Stravinsky's 1919 suite from *The Firebird* was probably the most familiar item on the programme and brought the evening to an exultant conclusion. After a gentle *Round Dance*, the *Finale* built skilfully – including a fine bassoon solo from Philip Le Bas – allowing the colours and textures of the score to shine through. Wind and brass ensembles were at their most relaxed, and the percussion came into its own. A suitably large and enthusiastic audience clearly enjoyed the whole evening. If anybody thinks I may be overlooking the odd missed note or fluff, the odd less than perfect entry, then let me assure them I am well aware of the minor imperfections of any live performance. There are very few orchestras in my experience who can get through an evening with every note perfectly formed – that only happens on carefully edited recordings – but the excitement of a live performance is far more worthwhile than any CD, no matter who the orchestra is!

October 2013 - Dr. Brian Hick / Kent Messenger & Lark Reviews - www.larkreviews.co.uk

The prospect of hearing Britten in the Mote Hall, Maidstone, conjures up visions of the Moot Hall at Aldeburgh, but the bleak concrete Leisure Centre could hardly be less romantic. Happily, once the lights are switched off, the Maidstone Symphony Orchestra adds a touch of magic and we are in a concert hall for the start of the new season.

Each concert includes a concerto with a young musician and it will surely be difficult for the other soloists this season to have quite the impact that Laura van der Heijden achieved last night in the Elgar cello concerto. The unusually slow, hushed opening was foretaste of what was to come. Where so many soloists find melancholy or even despair in these pages, here we had the joy that autumn can bring. Sudden tiny bursts of sunlight in the mist, minute changes of tone and colour, gone before we could pin them down. As the first movement drew towards its close she brought a coolness, even a playfulness to the phrasing which was deeply moving.

The second movement was clean and warm but never indulgent. Those of us used to a heady amount of portamento here may have been struck by the almost classical impact of the melodic line. This led to a noble opening for the final movement and a sparky conclusion. The return to the opening theme was a memory, not a fulfilment. When we recall that Laura van der Heijden won the BBC Young Musician of the year in 2012 and is only 16 now, this was a truly remarkable performance. I look forward to hearing her again soon.

The evening had opened with Britten's *Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes*. There was real tension in the wind and a rawness in the brass which was very effective, supported by secure strings. The acoustic is good but exposes solo parts so that the tiniest details can be heard. Individual woodwind entries in the storm scene were unexpectedly clear and the impact of the percussion brighter than usual.

After the interval we heard Rachmaninov's Third Symphony. If there had been any thought that the shrill wind and rasping brass had been endemic to the orchestra, the lush, highly romantic sounds produced here showed the range of tone the orchestra can produce. The string sound became more positive and lush and the horns warm and rounded. The trembling solo horn with the harp was particularly effective at the opening of the second movement. The final movement was furious in pace and Brian Wright held his forces together with aplomb, bringing all of us to a triumphant conclusion.