

Maidstone Symphony Orchestra, Mote Hall, 14 October 2023

Review by Susan Elkin – 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.

It was a fine and enjoyable concert overall and if one or two players were, unusually for MSO, not having the best of nights the hiccoughs were pretty brief and would have passed almost unnoticed by most of the audience.