

## WMS trip to Symphony Hall, Birmingham 14 April 2010

Concert programme: Dvořák: Carnival Overture  
Beethoven: Violin Concerto in D major - Isabelle Faust (violin)  
Mussorgsky: Pictures at an Exhibition (orchestration by Ravel)

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andrew Grams

Witney Music Society members and friends set off for Symphony Hall from Wood Green School on a very pleasant spring afternoon. The trip to Birmingham was somewhat more interesting than anticipated as we found ourselves travelling along some unexpected byways, but happily we arrived in sufficient time to have a speedy bite to eat before the concert.

The concert opened brightly with Dvořák's Carnival Overture. In this brief but lively work, the percussion section gave notice of the fireworks to come in the second half of the concert.

The rousing overture was followed by the longest item in the programme, Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D major. The soloist in this unconventional work was the German violinist Isabelle Faust, playing on a 1704 Stradivarius violin, known as the 'Sleeping Beauty Violin'. This superb instrument allowed the soloist to exhibit the full dynamic range of her thoughtful interpretation (although it has to be said that some of the quietest passages were a little too *piano* for certain members of the audience sitting at the back of the circle in Level 5!!)

The concerto opens unconventionally with several quiet drum beats, and this use of the timpani was echoed to great effect later in the work. Rather than the more familiar Kreisler cadenzas, Faust played cadenzas composed by Beethoven himself. He hadn't written these for the original violin concerto but rather for the later piano version of the concerto that he wrote some years later. The long cadenza at the end of the first movement was particularly noteworthy for the combination of some lovely violin playing memorably underpinned by some excellent timpani.

The pared-down classical orchestra for the Beethoven was substantially augmented for the final work in the concert, Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's 'Pictures at an Exhibition'. There was some fine playing from the brass section and the six percussionists had plenty to keep them busy.

Mussorgsky originally wrote this work for piano having been inspired by a posthumous exhibition of the works of his close friend, the painter Victor Hartmann. The work was written in 1874 but not published until after Mussorgsky's death; it was greatly admired, in particular by several French composers and was famously orchestrated by Ravel in 1922.

The work takes the form of a walk through a picture gallery, alternating the recurring 'promenade' theme with musical representations of the pictures that the viewer (and hence the listener) encounters. The Symphony Hall subtitles guided the audience through the work, introducing each section either as 'promenade' or with the title of its painting. Andrew Grams lead the CBSO through this familiar work with great energy and direction, as the programmatic music built through a series of images to the exhilarating climax of the Great Gate of Kiev.

In all, it was an excellent evening of music in Birmingham and thanks must go to all concerned in making the arrangements for our trip.