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**Pocket Sinfonia**

17-18 May 2024

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre, The Dance House Crewkerne

How well do you know Mozart’s last symphony, the so called, ‘Jupiter’? How well will Haydn’s Symphony no 102 sound without the original inclusion of horns, trumpets, and timpani? If you are familiar with either of these works in their full orchestral versions, will you be disappointed when they are played in arrangements by other composers for just four instruments? In an era of radio, recordings, and streaming where you can demand instant access to Mozart’s and Haydn’s originals, will you be able to listen without prejudice, understanding and fresh ears? Such were some of the questions posed by Pocket Sinfonia in the tour programme for Concerts in the West. Questions that were intriguing enough to entice full houses at the three venues.

As was pointed out to us by the well-prepared introductions from Rosie Bowker (flute), Eleanor Corr (violin), Thomas Isaac (cello) and Emil Duncomb (fortepiano), orchestral music that was popular during the 18th and 19th centuries could be arranged by the composer or others for smaller or different forces and played in more intimate surroundings by players to entertain themselves and perhaps friends. Two such arrangers of the period were the composers Johann Hummel and Muzio Clementi.

In addition to the two symphonies, Pocket Sinfonia’s programme included the Mozart ‘Magic Flute’ Overture, CPE Bach’s A minor flute quartet and Fanny Mendelssohn’s C major Overture. The two stringed instruments used gut strings, Rosie Bowker’s flute was a copy of a late 18th century wooden flute as was also the fortepiano owned by David Wright and made available with the support of the Continuo Foundation. The tuning of all instruments is affected by atmospheric conditions and never more so than instruments such as these in fairly confined spaces. Nonetheless, the Pocket Sinfonia players are very experienced musicians and coped well with the challenge.

The Haydn Symphony revealed the exceedingly nimble fingers of Emil Duncomb in the first movement and there was collective attention to detailed dynamics and accents in the Menuetto. The Finale Presto was a brilliant arrangement by Clementi of the original and equally brilliantly played with panache by Pocket Sinfonia.

Emil Duncomb’s arrangement of Fanny Mendelssohn’s Overture was a delight. In it, the cello is given a prominent role and which Thomas Isaac took full advantage to exhibit a range of tone colour and sensitivity. The warmer end of the flute range was used to good effect.

By the wonderful complexity of Mozart’s musical craft, the last movement of the ‘Jupiter’ Symphony was always going to be the apotheosis of the Pocket Sinfonia programme, and so it proved to be. The first three movements are a catalogue of the composer’s craft and his humanity, full of contrasting drama, poignancy, and passion. But all of that was a prologue to the stupendous heights of the finale. A four-instrument arrangement by Hummel of Mozart’s original may not equate with the depth and force of an orchestra but no one can deny the intensity of four accomplished players and the commitment they displayed to the music and each other.

As was originally intended, these were four musical friends performing arrangements of much valued music to listeners who, in this instance, caught their commitment and passion and in turn became their new friends.

Andrew Maddocks 2024