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Oxford Sinfonia opened its new season last weekend with a rare excursion into the Sheldonian — a venue much more suited to this 60-strong orchestra than its University Church home, and certainly more appropriate for a large-scale work like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which calls for a magnificent setting.

Serving as a tasty appetiser was Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, delivered with precision and clarity by Anthony Pay, whose vast experience was immediately evident in his authoritative handling of the solo line. But his insistence on using a specially reconstructed clarinet for greater authenticity resulted in a rather muted sound that lacked the sparkle normally associated with this sublime work. The pace seemed a little pedestrian, too. Technically, this was a flawless account, but one that, for me, failed to excite.

The Beethoven, though, was a different matter. Conductor Ian Brown set a brisk pace, drawing out the players' maximum potential with some vigorous, decisive and inspirational conducting, aided and abetted by Mariette Richter's usual solid and dependable leadership. The final movement came in an explosion of energy and emotion; by this point, Brown was practically dancing on the podium. There were some powerful contributions from the four soloists; Naomi Harvey's strong but sweet soprano voice and Lynton Black's rich bass were a particular joy, but there was some fine input, too, from mezzo Elinor Carter and tenor Adrian Thompson. My only reservation was that the four voices didn't blend well, resulting in a rather unbalanced sound. Thompson's tenor dominated, while Carter could, at times, be barely heard.

It was left to the choir to produce the singing par excellence of the evening. The splendid Philharmonia Chorus — formed 50 years ago, to record Beethoven's Ninth — produced a sound that was strong and vivacious but beautifully controlled, combined with a wonderfully pure and rich tone that gave the piece appropriate joy and sparkle.

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