

16 June 2007

By any standards, the Oxford Sinfonia's recent concert was a triumph. Soloist, conductor and orchestra gave it everything they'd got to produce a memorable evening of music. Opening with a sensitive performance of Sibelius's *Pelleas et Mellisande*, the orchestra and conductor showed themselves to be totally involved in finding a dynamic range to shed new light on this familiar suite. John Lubbock cajoled and encouraged outstanding solo and ensemble phrasing. From outset to close, this was a magical journey - in particular the exquisite cor anglais solos.

Then came Shostakovich's second cello concerto with Colin Carr. The mantle of Rostropovich was clearly on his shoulders for his inspired attack on this difficult work, which needs tight concentration from the orchestra and a very understanding conductor, but, above all, a soloist with the heart to make the technical difficulties subservient to the passion of the writing. Here it all came together. The lively percussionists deserve special mention for their virtuoso display.

After an interval, a very welcome chance to relax after such intensity, we were looking forward to an old favourite, Beethoven's *Symphony No 7*. A tried and tested old warhorse to be given another gentle trot? Not so: here came passion again, with strength and dynamism right from the start. The stark but resonant opening chords of the adagio set the tone. The familiar variations of the second movement had a new life, taken at a brisk pace, of which Beethoven would surely have approved. Especially memorable was the way in which every entry of the theme was given its own character. No chance of a quick nap here; this music needed full attention. A charming and not too demanding canter through the scherzo followed.

In the last movement Lubbock and his leader, Olivier Bonnici, took the whole orchestra away into a full gallop. It may have been fast, but every entry and nuance were there and finely judged. After that, the large audience responded to this concert with an enthusiasm seldom seen in Oxford.