

19 January 2008

Fauré, Ravel, and Stravinsky with the Oxford Sinfonia and Carolyn Dobbin

This was an ambitious programme for a non-professional orchestra, but it was executed very convincingly indeed. Such intensity pervaded the interpretation, that one had no choice but to forgive the slight imperfections which are inevitably present in an amateur performance.

The Oxford Sinfonia is an amateur chamber orchestra composed of players from in and around Oxford. Tonight they were conducted by Nicholas Cleobury, a former organ scholar of Worcester College, and currently conductor of the Britten Sinfonia. Irish mezzo-soprano Carolyn Dobbin sang in Ravel's *Shéhérazade*.

The concert opened with Fauré's charming suite 'Masques et Bergamasques'. Whilst it is probably not, as the concert programme claimed, Fauré's most famous orchestral work, it perhaps should be. The suite opens with a vigorous Overture, which was played with more energy than many commercial

recordings. The Minuet was executed with charm, and the glorious faux-Baroque Gavotte was taken at an appropriately steady pace, revelling in its own frivolous gravity. The piece closed with the dreamy Pastorale, beautifully rounding off this delightful work. Despite occasional slight scratchiness in the high strings, this was a thoroughly enjoyable performance.

The next number was Ravel's fairy tale suite *Ma Mère l'Oye* (Mother Goose), which tonight was presented in the five-movement version for orchestra. Although a few imperfect solos occasionally detracted from the magic, this piece was otherwise well delivered. The dazzling percussion playing in the quasi-oriental third movement (*Laideronette, Impératrice des pagodes*) was particularly impressive. The close of the final movement (*Le jardin féérique*) had a hint of Disney about it as the wedding bells chimed for the Prince and Princess: an appropriate happy ending to the more naive section of the programme.

To close the first half, soloist Carolyn Dobbin took to the stage for the song cycle *Shéhérazade*. With an impressive CV it was no surprise that her performance tonight was both musically and theatrically superb. This performance was sometimes (but not always) matched by the orchestra, which had some tuning issues in the brass section. The first poem, *Asie*, was sung with a wide-eyed restraint, occasionally breaking forth into exuberant climax. There was some beautiful flute playing in *La flûte enchantée*, and *L'indifférent* was delivered with a delicious sensuousness.

The 'final hurdle', as one player described it to me in the interval, was Stravinsky's *Symphony in C*, and the hurdle was well and truly cleared. The symphony started strongly, and the rhythmic levity of the opening section gave way to a breathtaking violence reminiscent of *The Rite of Spring*. The

contrasting peaceful and disturbed elements of the *Larghetto* were conveyed skilfully, at turns playful and threatening. The *Scherzo* was perhaps slightly more chaotic than the composer intended, but this formidable movement was tackled with characteristic vigour. The finale was exquisite as the piece built up to a tense climax and then failed to resolve, settling into a combination of C and G chords before fading away.

This was an impressive concert, the Oxford Sinfonia playing to a very high standard. Their next engagement is a charity come-and-sing Verdi's Requiem on 2 February at the Sheldonian Theatre (tickets available from Tickets Oxford 01865 305305).

by Daniel Trott [www.cherwell.org](http://www.cherwell.org)