

20 January 2006

Oxford Sinfonia opened its new season with a beautifully balanced programme of pieces by Beethoven, Haydn and Strauss, demonstrating once again what a versatile and proficient orchestra this is.

Beethoven's *Coriolanus* and *Prometheus* were symmetrically placed at the beginning of each half, the former treated with appropriate passion and dramatic appreciation, the latter drawing a fine contrast between those early running quavers and the lyrical warmth of the second theme.

Conductor William Carslake made sure we were allowed to appreciate the full brilliance and inventiveness of Beethoven's scores, with two masterful displays of precision, intensity and total commitment.

Richard Strauss's oboe concerto is a notoriously difficult addition to the oboe repertoire, largely due to the fact that there are no breaks between the three movements and so the unfortunate soloist has little chance to rest.

The mental and physical stamina required is so immense that the American oboist John Mack once likened playing the piece to "swimming between two islands in shark-infested waters". So how did Saturday night's soloist, John Anderson, make it all seem so effortless?

The opening passage, a mighty 56 bars long, is enough to test the most resilient of players, but Anderson coped magnificently with the composer's extraordinary demands, producing an exquisite tone that he sustained throughout the *andante* movement and the spirited finale.

During the interval, I heard several appreciative comments from audience members clearly delighted at Anderson's eloquence and mastery.

Anything that followed could have seemed an anticlimax, but the orchestra's robust and radiant account of Haydn's *Symphony No. 99* was equally delightful. Once again, Carslake ensured a lively and thrilling rendition, with the wind section coming well and truly into its own in the second movement, which is believed to have been written in tribute to Haydn's friend, Marianne von Genzinger.