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Fresh imagination in Rachmaninov, weird Sibelius and affirmative Nielsen

by David Nice | Saturday, 17 January 2015

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Federico Colli: transcendental pianist with bags of imagination

Sarah Ferrara

Was 1911 the best ever year for music? Works premiered or composed then include Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and the Tenth Symphony he'd completed in outline by the time of his death that May, Sibelius's most austere masterpiece, the Fourth – for which the little oddity which opened last night's concert, *The Dryad*, sounded like a sketch – and Nielsen's Third, self-subtitled "Espansiva" but in this performance more like the "Inexhaustible" to blaze a path for the "Inextinguishable" Fourth. Even Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto of 1909, the only work of that time usually lurking in the woods of pure late romanticism, came up fresh and challenging.

You don't engage a pianist who can't handle the torrents of "the Rach Three", and we were lucky in the replacement for an indisposed Yevgeny Subdin, young Leeds and Salzburg prizewinner Federico Colli, making his London concerto debut. An inspired one, to say the least. This is an artist who not only plays all the notes but also brings an absolutely individual imagination to what lies behind them. The tempo he set at the start of a work which might well have segued straight out of Sibelius's fragmentary wood-magic felt a bit held back, and it was clear that Sakari Oramo and the BBC Symphony Orchestra were the ones who would have to keep tabs – which they did with unbelievable clarity and generosity of spirit, right from guest principal bassoonist Amy Harman's soulful counterpoint to the opening melody; Colli's self-absorption as he curved around the keyboard, a million miles from the upright, beaming, open-to-the-world attitude of veteran virtuoso Garrick Ohlsson here the other side of Christmas, wasn't going to give.

“Rachmaninov's final peroration was the only point where Oramo let shapely strings dictate the pace”

Yet he didn't have to, with all orchestral colours attuned to his singular vision – and I've never noticed the low harmonies of the horns, beautifully led as ever by Nicholas Korth, or indeed other touches in what usually comes across as mere support orchestration, sounding so subtly complementary to the soloist. Colli's vision shouldn't have worked as well as it did, but somehow the agogic

pauses, unusual breaks in phrases and dynamic extremes avoided mannerism and all added up to music with something to say, which isn't always the case when the concerto is treated like a warhorse.

“Nielsen's opening Allegro espansivo flew like an arrow through seismic waves and cosmic merry-go-round waltzes”

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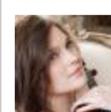
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Colli's retreat into dreams offered rare metaphysics, but he handled his first big meditation in the slow movement with a boldness that nevertheless brought tears to the eyes, and he managed the cavalcade that leads to the finale's big tune, so often fudged, with perfect impetus towards a winged poem. Its final peroration was the only point where Oramo let shapely strings dictate the pace, and here at the last hurdle Colli, still in his own world, nearly fell, but they all got to the end in one thrilling piece, justifying a singular and well-paced journey.

With the Nielsen Third, first major offering of the composer's 150th anniversary year, we stayed out in the fresh air (a younger Nielsen in gurning mood **pictured right**, courtesy of the Royal Library, Copenhagen). The opening *Allegro espansivo* in Oramo's determined interpretation - very loud in this venue, a tad driven, but a style well suited to Nielsen in this mood - flew like an arrow through seismic waves and cosmic merry-go-round waltzes to a triumphant final chord, proud man in all his unstoppable glory.



Impassive nature launched the *Andante pastorale*, only to be questioned by melancholy birdsong – flautist Daniel Pailthorpe and oboist Richard Simpson peerlessly personable as ever – and human string responses tore at the heartstrings before we reached the plateau, that radiant summer landscape with wordless soprano and baritone voices (Lucy Hall and **Marcus Farnsworth**, ecstatic at the back of the platform). Indebted to Wagnerian forest murmurs but somehow more redolent of all that sky you get in Danish landscape paintings, it's followed by a dynamic wander into the woods, Nielsen's most puzzling movement structurally; but especially with focused dynamism like Oramo's, the invention is so strong and its direction so unstoppable that you never question the argument.

There's not a slack bar in this entire masterpiece, not even in a finale where a big tune, stout and steaky like the parade glories in the comparable movement of Elgar's Second Symphony – another masterpiece of 1911 which, **along with the First**, Oramo has championed in Stockholm – seems to say it all straight off, and yet ends up meriting a new and noble key in its typically compact final statement. This Nielsen series is already living up to the even more needful **cycle of six Martinů symphonies** championed by Oramo's BBCSO predecessor, Jiří Bělohlávek. Both conductors have already persuaded us that both composers are up there alongside Sibelius, Shostakovich and Vaughan Williams as the towering symphonists of the 20th century, and possibly the greatest masters of affirmative capability, for you couldn't help but come away from concerts like this feeling better about life.

- [Next Nielsen symphony from Oramo and the BBCSO is the Fourth, "Inextinguishable", on 18 February](#)
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