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Despax playing brilliant

The Press | Monday, 9 July 2007

Mid-Winter Gala Eroica. Christchurch Symphony with Emmanuel Despax (piano), conductor Sir William Southgate. Town Hall Auditorium, July 7. Reviewed by Patrick Shepherd.

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The Christchurch Symphony continued its season programming the old with the new, juxtaposing three monumental works by Webern, Beethoven and Mozart.

The new also came in the form of young French pianist Emmanuel Despax, an already accomplished student from the Menuhin School and Royal College of Music, whose playing shows maturity way beyond his years and a command of his instrument that augurs well for a stellar career.

Describing Webern's Variations for Orchestra as new and monumental seems curious for a short work written nearly 70 years ago but Saturday night proved that it is still as challenging and impenetrable for this audience as it was back in 1940. I love it and applauded Sir William Southgate repeating it immediately, but I doubt it was a popular decision for many for whom once was enough.

Good on the small core of symphony players who got to grips with this work and gave two convincing performances.

Mozart's D minor concerto K. 466 is probably his finest concerto in any genre. Despax brought energy and a brilliant technique to bear in a sensitive and well-considered performance.

On occasion I felt he wanted to push the tempo more, particularly in the finale, but cohesion and balance with the orchestra was generally good.

The first movement was an excellent blend of gloom and fire and Despax created a nice sense of space in the Romanze. His encore was dazzling, taken at breakneck speed with a wonderfully clearly defined chorale in the inner voice.

Continuing the Beethoven cycle with the Eroica, the orchestra seemed restrained in the first movement but was unleashed to deliver an explosive scherzo.

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