

Review of **Frome Symphony**, Monday 6th July 2009

Stephen's Swan Song

It was with mixed feelings that the packed audience assembled at St John's Church for Frome Symphony's Festival concert: an exciting programme of Romantic Masterworks in prospect, but also a tinge of sadness that this was to be the last Frome Symphony concert conducted by the charismatic and much-loved Stephen Marquiss. Stephen it was who founded Frome Symphony eight years ago. In response to his invitation in the local paper, forty orchestral musicians turned up at the first rehearsal, and the rest is history.

Still, we weren't there to be nostalgic and sorrowful, but to enjoy a fine programme of nineteenth century orchestral works, and enjoy them we did.

Schubert's Fierabras Overture captured the attention straightaway, with the atmospheric tremolo strings and contrasting choruses of wind and brass. I was immediately reminded of the absolute joy of hearing live music, where orchestral colours are so clear and individual timbres are so beautiful. The Schubert had all the hallmarks of the expressive early Romantic, with sudden changes of dynamic, dramatic contrasts, the spirited tutti, and the extraordinary power of the quiet timpani roll. The number of violins was comparatively small but they played valiantly, rising to the challenges of syncopation and holding their own impressively.

How fortunate Frome Symphony is to have a violinist of Ursula Voigt's standing as leader! Tonight Ursula was the poised and smiling soloist in Bruch's Violin Concerto No 1 in G minor. Her love of music-making was immediately visible and audible, from the opening arpeggio, warm, sweet, impassioned and committed. Her strong, clear tone, exquisite vibrato, and impressive double-stopping were played from the heart. Stephen Marquiss's expansive gestures drew real musicality out of the orchestra. This performance was truly moving. The orchestral strings accompanied the soloist with sensitivity, and admirable balance was achieved, Ursula Voigt's soaring melodies projected over the orchestra. Even very quiet playing was beautifully judged. Shapely phrasing gave the loveliest sense of line. There were sweet solos from flute and horn.

At the start of the third movement there was a very well controlled building up to the famous theme, delightful shifting textures and a triumphant lyricism and a thrilling accelerando brought us to the final flourishing cadence. Ursula Voigt was given a much deserved standing ovation.

Mr Jon Benger (French horn player) gave a vote of thanks to the audience, musicians, Frome Festival and particularly to Stephen Marquiss, under whose leadership the orchestra had grown and developed musically, starting with Rossini and Vaughan Williams and progressing to Prokofiev's Lieutenant Kijé last December and tonight Borodin's Second symphony. After a presentation to Stephen, the rich, Russian sonorities of the lower strings in a muscular and menacing unison opened the Symphony. This was such a good choice of music to show off the orchestra's capabilities. It was jam-packed with lovely familiar tunes, exciting displays of orchestral effects, opportunities for well-played solos from every section, too many to mention individually, rhythmic vitality and the precision of split-second timing. What a pleasure it was to hear Borodin's masterly orchestration with its finale's sunny, dancing temperament, with unexpected flashes of colour, all ending with a bang.

Thank you, Stephen for all you have done for Frome's musical scene! We look forward to hearing more from you in the future. Good luck to Frome Symphony's new conductor, whoever that may be: Stephen is a hard act to follow!

Ann Burgess