

BBC Philharmonic/Nosedà/Ehnes – review

By Tim Ashley - Sunday 24 February 2013



Canadian violinist James Ehnes and Gianandrea Nosedà, now the BBC Philharmonic's conductor laureate, have become something of a partnership of choice as far as the 20th-century violin concerto is concerned. After notable successes, both live and on disc, with Bartók, they've turned their attention to Prokofiev, whose Second Violin Concerto, flanked by music by Rossini and Stravinsky, formed the centrepiece of this exceptional concert that found both of them at their best.

Ehnes's no-frills approach works wonders with Prokofiev. The sombre first movement, by turns barbed and lyrical, was beautifully understated, and its tricky combination of harmonic bitterness, muted virtuosity and melodic expansion flawlessly judged. The finale, with its biting folk rhythms and pungent dissonances, was weighty, witty and sharply focused. The work's chief glory, however, is the central Andante, with its slowly unfolding melody, which ranks among the most ravishing things in Prokofiev's entire output. Ehnes delivered it with exquisite poise, while Nosedà teased out the orchestral textures with infinite grace.

Rossini, meanwhile, was represented by the William Tell Overture, and Stravinsky by The Firebird. Rossini's familiar warhorse – done without sentimentality and without scrambling the final gallop – sounded fresh and new minted. Stravinsky's epoch-making ballet, similarly, found Nosedà at his most radical and insightful. There was a sexiness and an edge-of-your-seat excitement to the whole thing. The balance between post-Romantic opulence and proto-modernist violence was superbly negotiated. Sonorities throughout were warm yet breathtakingly clear. The moments that can sometimes hang fire – most notably the altercation between Ivan and Kaschey and the build up to the Infernal Dance – were full of terrific tension and drama. Hard to imagine the piece better done, and absolutely outstanding.