

## ***The first Levoča Festival, 27 September to 5 October 2008***

### **27<sup>th</sup> 19.00 Recital by the Stamic Quartet in the Theatre.**

Leoš Janáček - String Quartet, No.1 "The Kreutzer Sonata" (1923)

Ján Bella - String Quartet No.3 in C minor (1880)

Antonín Dvořák - String Quartet in F major, No.12 Op.95 "American" (1893)

The Janáček and the Bella quartets were excellently played, but after the tumult and ferocity of the Janáček finale, the quiet, introspective opening of Bella's quartet rather lost its significance. Possibly it might have been better to play them in the reverse order, or in this order, but separated by the interval. The Dvořák quartet did not come off quite as well as was to be expected from what had gone before it. Possibly this piece has been played too often and needs a rest. As an encore the Quartet played the middle movement of Mozart's Quartet in D minor, K421. The journey seemed worthwhile for this alone.

After the concert artists and audience were invited by the Mayor to a lavish reception.

### **28<sup>th</sup> 15.00 Recital by Ivo Kahánek, Blüthner piano, in the Congress Hall.**

Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata in E major, Op.109

Bohuslav Martinů - Sonata (1954)

Eugen Suchón - *Metamorfózy* Nos.1 & 2

Robert Schumann - *Études Symphoniques* Op.13

It had been planned to have all the events in the very charming small theatre. However, it proved impossible to get the piano into the theatre, so this and most of the succeeding events took place in the Congress Hall. This turned out to be an advantage as the acoustics of the hall were considerably better than those of the theatre.

The Martinů sonata, dedicated to Rudolf Serkin, is an exciting work ending with (as the programme notes describe) dynamic ferocity and it was played for all it was worth to bring out all of its drama. It was the high point of the concert.

Suchón's - *Metamorfózy* is a set of five pieces. Probably the two played would have been better heard as part of the set.

Schumann's *Études Symphoniques* were played with great fire and all of the required virtuosity, but with a somewhat misplaced range of dynamics. Thus the quieter more reflective passages were not quiet enough and the louder passages

were over loud, perhaps from use of too much pedal, the effect enhanced by the rather resonant ambience. This might not have that problem had the hall been full, but it is for a pianist to adjust his playing for such matters.

The programme opened with Beethoven's Op.109, the first of the last three sonatas. It was a well prepared, but rather cool performance. It is the least dramatic of the last three, but even so its depths were not explored. It came across rather as a warming-up a piece, which it certainly is not.

## **28<sup>th</sup> 19.00 Stamic Quartet & Ivo Kahánek, piano, in the Congress Hall.**

Felix Mendelssohn - String Quartet No.2 in A minor Op.13

Eugen Suchóň - String Quartet Op.2

Antonín Dvořák - Piano Quintet No.2 in A major Op.81

Mendelssohn wrote this quartet, actually his first, at the age of eighteen. In its astonishing maturity it surpasses anything of Mozart by several years. The references to the late quartets Beethoven, in both style and material, would otherwise be both pretentious and impertinent. It received a superb performance, more than atoning for any shortcomings in the previous evening's Dvořák.

The Suchóň quartet has some fine moments, but they are interspersed with pages of academic writing and abrasive chords. Although this judgement is based on but one hearing, it is safe to say that the work is too long and, as for a rose, a good pruning would bring out its strengths. Whatever one's feelings about the music, great effort had been put into the performance.

Dvořák's quintet is a work of sunshine and happiness. The further the lid of a piano is opened, the better the tone. However, particularly on full stick, the pianist with a string quartet (or solo voice) must be ever wary of unbalance. Here, but for a brief moment or two towards the end of the finale, when he rather let rip, the problem was completely solved.

The evening was rounded off with a repeat of the 'Furiant' as an encore.

## **29<sup>th</sup> 19.00 Nicholas King, organist, in the Church of St. Jacobus.**

C.-V. Alkan - Onze Pièces dans le style religieux, Op.72 Nos.1, 11 & 10

Franz Liszt - Fantasia & Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam' S.259

Johann Sebastian Bach - Passacaglia & Fugue in C minor, BWV582

Modest Moussorgsky arr. Keith John - Pictures from an Exhibition

Devotees of organ music are used to sitting in cold dark churches. Thus, clad in duffle coats and gloves, they turned out to welcome the Society's secretary and resident expert on Public Service Vehicles who doubled this evening as an organist. Nicholas King was hampered by the short compass of the instrument and by its need of the services of a tuner. The first difficulty his skills concealed remarkably well, the second was seriously obtrusive in one of the Alkan pieces, less so elsewhere. This was a pity, for many of the audience were hearing music of Alkan to the first-time, and a composer being experienced for the first time deserves the best possible hearing.

At 34 minutes the piece by Liszt does not suffer from brevity. It is a tribute to our organist that attention never flagged.

Unsurprisingly, the high point of the evening was Bach's Passacaglia & Fugue, for it is one of the instrument's greatest glories. The choice of stops in this large building was particularly effective.

According to the programme notes, Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* was an arrangement. It seemed, however, to be more a straightforward transcription. Either way, one might ask if it could work on an organ in a large resonant building and at one or two points it did sound a little strange. However, King's convincing choices of registrations and tempi won the day.

### **30<sup>th</sup> 19.00 The Slovak Chamber Orchestra, in the Congress Hall**

Josef Suk - Serenade for Strings, Op.6

Eugen Suchón - Serenade for Strings (1932)

Antonín Dvořák - Serenade for Strings in E major, Op.22

The Slovak Chamber Orchestra is a string ensemble of young players, 7-3-2-1, including leader/conductor. It was founded in 1960 by Bohdan Warchal and was been led by him throughout its history, hence its alternative name, the Warchalovci Chamber Orchestra. The players were in an approximate semicircle with the leader/conductor at the centre. The ensemble was excellent, though when in unison at full power the seven violins did sound a little strident and occasionally slightly suspect in intonation.

Originally, the programme for this concert included piano music by Liszt as its central section. Owing apparently to a passport problem, the pianist was unable to be present. At very short notice the orchestra substituted the central piece, thus providing a programme entirely of serenades. Now, Chambers's Dictionary, and Grove, though more lengthy, does not disagree, tells us that a serenade is, "evening music in the open air, esp. given by a lover to his mistress under her window at night; a piece of music suitable to such an occasion". Examples of serenades by Mozart most admirably fit this description, but would the big dramatic scenes of some movements of later examples have been allowable?

Suk, like Mendelssohn, wrote his first serenade at the age of eighteen. It is a very pleasant and enjoyable work, and to add that nowhere is it on the level of Mendelssohn at the same age is not to detract from it.

Suchóň's serenade, which also exists as a string quartet, is a mature work of great elegance, producing an impression completely contrary to that previously.

The Dvořák serenade is a great work, based loosely on Bohemian folk songs.

After a deservedly well-received programme the group played Dvořák's 'Humoresque' [actually No.7 of 8 Humoresques for piano, Op.101] as an encore.

To comment adversely on a gift, and an encore is a gift, moreover a gift presented at the end of a hard evening's work, is ungracious. The writer hopes nevertheless be pardoned for suggesting that instead of sending the audience home with a piece of kitsch in its ears, a piece in years gone by, worn out by every violinist from Ysaÿe downwards, a brief movement from another serenade would have been a happier choice. The minuet from *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* suggests itself.

### **1<sup>st</sup> 19.00 The Holywell Ensemble, in the Congress Hall**

Margaret Ozanne, piano; Peter Nichols, clarinet;  
Kate Bailey, violin and Spike Wilson, cello

Darius Milhaud - Suite for violin, clarinet and piano

Ludwig van Beethoven - Trio in E flat, Op.38

Richard Hill - The Island on the Edge of the World

Ján Bella - Elegy

John Ireland - Phantasie Trio in A minor

Astor Piazzolla - Otono Porteno (Tango)

The Holywell Ensemble from Oxford offered a diverse and interesting programme. Milhaud's suite is from the incidental music which he wrote for *Le Voyageur sans bagages*, a Jean Anouilh play of 1936. It received an excellent performance.

The opus numbers of Beethoven's works go up to about 260, but how many of them does one actually know, how many of them constitute the "great" Beethoven?

9 symphonies, 6 concertos, 16 quartets, 1 opera, 1 mass, 1 trio, 6 overtures and about 20 piano and violin sonatas. As one begins to scratch one's head the triple concerto and the septet come to mind. Though the fire does not burn at its brightest in these works, the hallmark of Beethoven is perceived immediately in every bar. This is an arrangement by Beethoven for piano, clarinet, and cello of the septet. It was good to have the opportunity of hearing this version, but there were problems of balance. Almost throughout the cellist needed to be stronger, more assertive. Perhaps at rehearsal he should have raised the question of the relative strengths of the three instruments. At times, too, the pianist tended to be playing a solo.

Richard Hill's work was interesting and clearly needs to be heard several times.

Ján Bella's *Elegy* was inconsequential but pleasant.

John Ireland's *Phantasie Trio* is a fine piece, but here also the pianist tended to forget that it was a trio

Astor Pizolla's *Tango* was not particularly inspiring.

As an encore the group played 'So in love' by Cole Porter.

After the concert H.M. Ambassador to Slovakia, Michael Roberts invited the artists and audience to a reception in the council chamber of the town hall.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> 19.00 Recital by Tomasz Kamieniak, Blüthner piano, in the Congress Hall.**

Józef Wieniawski - Valse de Concert, No.2

Richard Wagner arr. Franz Liszt - Pilgrims' Chorus from Tannhäuser

Vincenzo Bellini arr. Sigismond Thalberg - Caprice 'La Sonnambula'

Charles-Valentin Alkan - Concerto for solo piano, Op.39 Nos.8-10

In a minority of one. A programme of pieces of tremendous and ever increasing pianistic difficulty played by steel fingers commanding enormous technical facility, much of the time at extraordinarily loudness was received with a prolonged standing ovation. Thus any qualms in the mind of this writer are recorded in the full knowledge that he is in a minority of one. Many years ago he had to do with the testing of military equipment: Blüthner Mk.IV No.12345. After storage for 90 days at -30°C and 10% Relative Humidity followed by 90 days at 50°C and 90% R.H. the piano started within 8 seconds and operated for 85 minutes at full power and for 15 minutes at 25% overload. Kamieniak's loud chords were delivered with a hard percussive quality in single chords, and a general lack of definition and loss of component notes in groups of chords. Now, Kamieniak was undoubtedly born with talent and he has undoubtedly nurtured it, by devoting years to serious study and gruelling practice. However, to apply his armoury effectively, exuberance and display must be tempered with moderation and restraint; his audience must feel that he is playing the piano not attacking it.

Liszt's transcription is very literal; the pilgrims should be heard, at first almost imperceptibly, approaching from the distance. 'Ah! Non credea mirarti' from *La Sonnambula* is sung by a weeping girl crossing a bridge in her sleep; something of this should be audible even in an arrangement as loose as Thalberg's.

These comments may seem harsh, but they are, as all criticism should be, written sincerely and intended constructively.

**3<sup>rd</sup> 19.00 Recital by Jonathon Powell, Blüthner piano, in the Congress Hall.**

Frédéric Chopin - Polonaise-Fantasie, Op.61

Gabriel Fauré - Nocturne No.13 in B minor, Op.119

Charles-Valentin Alkan - Symphony for solo piano, Op.39 Nos.4-7

Alexander Scriabin - Sonata No.10, Op.70

John White - Sonatas Nos.138, 95 & 164

Sergei Rachmaninov - Sonata No.2 (original version)

Jonathan Powell appeared at the Festival at short notice as a replacement.

The centrepiece of his programme was the Alkan Symphony. Not only did this double the amount of time dedicated to Alkan at the Festival, but it was by a considerable margin the finest performance of this work that the writer has heard in a goodly while. That this might be so was suggested by the overall quality of performance of the first two numbers.

The second half of the concert opened with a sonata by Scriabin; an interesting work, cleverly crafted and of just the right length for the material on which it is built. The composer regarded it as a sonata of insects. The insect content was not apparent, but this did not seem much to matter.

The discovery of the evening for this writer, and, he guesses, for most of the audience, was the composer, John White. The three sonatas played this evening whet the appetite for more. Perhaps at the next festival Jonathan Powell will be invited to devote an entire recital to this composer.

The programme was generous in its diversity and length, and generosity, as has been mentioned already, is a matter for gratitude rather than question. Nevertheless, as a final number something less heavy than Rachmaninov's sonata might have been more appropriate; perhaps a sonata by Haydn or Mozart.

There were two encores: 'Snenie' by Suk and an arrangement by Ginsburg from *Casanova*, an opera by Lubomir Rózycki.

**4<sup>th</sup> 15.00 Recital of modern film music, transcribed and played by Tomasz Kamieniak, Petrof piano, in the Levoča School of Music.**

Verwandlungsmusik. There must have been about thirty short pieces. Rather than programme notes there were announcements. (These were bilingual, one language unknown to the writer, the other at too low a level for comprehension, but one piece had to do with Dracula and another with Fu Man Chu.) Many of the pieces may well have been arrangements rather than transcriptions; most were pleasant and easy on the ear. The overall effect was a sort of *Motion Pictures at an Exhibition*, and indeed at one point there seemed to be a thematic connection. It was good to see many children in the audience, many of them very young, and if

they wandered in and out and chattered a little it did not matter. The hall of the School of Music, like the Congress Hall, is an auditorium of the traditional shoe-box design, but in each dimension about half the size, and the Petrof piano about two thirds of the length of the Congress Hall's Blüthner.

And now *Verwandlungsmusik*. After the barnstorming excesses of a couple of evenings previously your reviewer anticipated that this concert would be a matter of duty rather than pleasure. However, to his utter astonishment there was no barnstorming, but delicacy and restraint, and a sensible range of dynamics. The reader may well question the competence of a reviewer who in the course of a couple of days completely changes his judgement of an artist. In mitigation it can only be added that, being very concerned himself, he conducted a mini straw-poll which indicated that others present on both occasions shared his findings.

**4<sup>th</sup> 19.00 Ensemble VSMU - Jeux - a musical entertainment with ballet, puppets and black theatre, in the theatre.**

In the absence of the artist scheduled to appear this evening, due to a family bereavement, the programme for the following afternoon was brought forward.

*Jeux* is the final year practical module for their degree course of five students of Prof. Pawel Uher at the Bratislava Academy of Performing Arts. It is a musical entertainment with ballet, puppets and black theatre with an accompaniment, from records, of music by Debussy, Françaix, Ravel and Stravinsky. There were simple props and day-glo paints were used very effectively against the jet black backcloth. Every detail had been thoroughly rehearsed and the standard of production was high. All in all it was an ideal entertainment for the little theatre. Adults thought that three quarters of an hour was sufficient and children asked why it could not go on longer, so probably it was just about right.

**5<sup>th</sup> 19.00 Los Remedios Ensemble - "Nights in the Gardens of Spain", Spanish Flamenco song and dance from traditional music to Piazzolla, in the theatre.**

According to Grove's dictionary, flamenco derives from traditional song of Andalusia. Originally this was deep and profound. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had become largely music made in prisons, thus sad or tragic. By the end of the century, having always been a favourite of gypsies, it had been taken up by those who affected gypsy ways. Coincident with the first production of *Carmen* it began to be studied and imitated. At this time it acquired the name flamenco, i.e. flamingo or Flemish.

A large battery of microphones and loudspeakers, utterly unnecessary in the little theatre, failed to conceal that the group's talents were rather modest.

Music festivals don't just happen; they result from a prodigious amount of work built on foundations of vision, idealism, willingness to take risks and ability to cope with last-minute emergencies without panic.

This festival has provided opportunities of hearing a considerable amount of music off the beaten track, much of it in very good, and excellent performances. The Alkan Society feels that the quantity of Alkan's music performed justified the extent of its sponsorship. It is of interest to note that four members of the Society were present, including one from the United States, and that three members were present for the entire festival.

One hopes that the promoters of the festival will feel sufficiently encouraged to continue in future years. May one suggest some possible programmes, based on a small number of artists of good quality?

Two evenings of piano trios:

a) Trio No.25 in G major (Haydn), Trio in E flat K498 (Mozart)  
and the 'Archduke' (Beethoven)

b) Alkan's three chamber works

Two evenings of piano, violin and cello sonatas

An evening of Bach's organ music, provided that an instrument in tune is available.