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Spira mirabilis at the Queen Elizabeth Hall

Richard Morrison, 27 May 2012

Tragically, because of the Caligula nonsense, I missed Spira mirabilis's performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on Friday. Because this astonishing orchestra doesn't do recordings, believing the live experience to be sacrosanct, there's no way of confirming the infuriating rumours that it was sensational. But I can report that Saturday's performance of the Pastoral Symphony was one of the most glorious Beethoven interpretations I have ever heard.

This is the multinational orchestra of young virtuosi (most of them playing in other top European bands) who meet in an Italian town for a fortnight each year. They rehearse a single work, then perform it — just one piece in each concert — without a conductor. That idealism and unwavering focus is admirable in itself, for the orchestral profession is (out of necessity) generally far more pragmatic than visionary.

But what makes Spira mirabilis worth writing about is the quality of their performance. By their own admission the players spend hours in rehearsal compensating for the absence of a conductor with intense discussions about the tiniest details. Then they must keep the show together without a governing baton. That involves endless eye contact (some seemed to perform the entire symphony without glancing at their parts) as well as total aural alertness to each other's nuances.

The result is a spellbinding unanimity that sounds, to the outsider, almost telepathic. And it's not as if the orchestra opts for easy solutions. The music is exquisitely shaped; the placing of chords is never routine; textures are deconstructed and reconstructed to revelatory effect. With this band there is no default position. All is freshly minted.

In spirit this Pastoral was generally light-fingered and graceful, especially from the sinuous strings who hardly used vibrato. But those words don't encompass the magic velvet shimmer of the murmuring lower strings in the second movement, nor the rumbustious peasant swing in the third, nor the thunderous thwack of the Storm, nor the vivid character of the wind solos.

As the players admit in the post-concert discussions that are almost as engaging as their performances, their way of doing things is hardly a viable economic model for orchestral music. But how marvellous that somebody, somewhere, can aspire to this level of symphonic sophistication without worrying about money.