

Concert

Spira mirabilis/Kate Royal Queen Elizabeth Hall

★★★★☆

A strange misfire this, and all the more disappointing that it came from Spira mirabilis, the radical collective who monkishly convene in a musical retreat two or three times a year to explore repertoire inside and out, have intensive debates about vibrato, pizzicato and rubato, and generally produce revelatory results without anyone waving a baton. Another part of the group's stubborn charm is that they will only tour a single work.

The trouble with this performance of Schubert's Octet in F was that Spira weren't competing with other orchestras, but with some of the great chamber-music ensembles, who never play with a conductor anyway and, unlike Spira, spend most of their time with each other on the road. While there were some nicely incisive touches here, particularly from the fiery first violin Lorenza Borrani and the sensitive clarinettist Miriam Caldarini, there were few revelations.

In an expressively wideranging but also unwieldy work, the eight players relished most of all the transitions, bringing a dark severity of purpose to Schubert's minor-key byways. Missing was real blend: the balance between instruments was not ideal, and the tuning not always consistent. It sounded like eight musicians jamming along together, and by Spira's own high standards they aspire to much more.

With the rest of the evening to fill out, hopes rested with the soprano Kate Royal and accompanist Malcolm Martineau. A pity that they weren't presenting more fibrous material than the Schubert selection chosen, made yet more blurry by the absence of printed words. But since I last heard the silky-voiced Royal in lieder, her interpretative skills have come on in leaps and bounds, and she plucked the heartstrings far more speedily and directly than Spira's artful skirmishes, delivering bittersweet verse with gleaming poise.

Neil Fisher