

Orchestra Europa: a new orchestra with a refreshing approach – review

Orchestra Europa, which offers new music graduates the chance to gain orchestral experience, offers a polished account of Schubert and Mozart at the Cadogan Hall in London

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ORCHESTRA Europa is as newish ensemble, established with the aim of nurturing instrumental players on the threshold of a professional career and giving them the chance to work alongside musicians already seasoned in the day-to-day practicalities of orchestral life. Its nearest equivalent, perhaps, is the New World Symphony Orchestra in Miami, which over the years has developed a sophisticated scheme of training and has achieved a commendable success rate in placing instrumentalists in jobs with major symphony orchestras.

Orchestra Europa operates in tandem with Britain's conservatoires, choosing its members from the corpus of postgraduates, providing career advice and even pragmatically broaching the possibility of unemployment. This potential drawback in the music business, however, did not seem to cast any noticeable cloud over the orchestra's concert of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony and Mozart's "Requiem". It was a good-natured, serious-minded event, secure in its orchestral co-ordination, distinguished in its solo playing and generally sound in its no-nonsense approach to two such staples of the classical repertoire.

The orchestra's founder, Scott Ellaway, conducted clearly and with care, establishing judicious paces for the two movements of the Schubert and drawing from the 50 or so players a sonority that was well-focused, balanced and with a healthy depth to it. Lines were fluent, the articulation of style was in keeping with the music, and the symphony's structural framework was confidently expounded. If the majority of the orchestral members still had youth on their side, the degree of polish and commitment yielded no suggestion here of inexperience.

For the Mozart "Requiem", Orchestra Europa was joined by the BBC Singers, whose thorough dependability in the intricacies of fugue or the resonances of full-throated choral writing found counterparts in the orchestra's sensitivity and incisiveness of attack. Among the four soloists it was especially pleasing to hear the fresh, pure tones and elegant phrasing of the tenor Andrew Staples, whose lovely voice possesses clarion clarity but moulds itself expressively to the needs of the moment. The quartet was completed with discerning contributions from soprano Lisa Milne, alto Louise Winter and bass Jonathan Lemalu.

Whenever a new orchestra is formed, it is liable to raise questions about the advisability of adding to an already well-served market. But Orchestra Europa has a particular educational brief that marks it out. Moreover, on the evidence of this concert, the players are obviously learning something and relishing the process.