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Review: When in Rome, CBSO, at Birmingham Symphony Hall

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OPINION

BY CHRISTOPHER MORLEY



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When in Rome, CBSO, at Symphony Hall



Written as long ago as 1943, Wolf-Ferrari's Violin Concerto had to wait until last Wednesday for its UK premiere. It's a piece which in fact looks back well over a century prior to its birth, referring to a farrago of sources among which I spotted Mendelssohn, Bruch, and even the Beethoven of the Fourth Symphony.

There were probably many more assimilations in this indiscriminate outpouring destined for Guila Bustabo, a virtuoso violin half Wolf-Ferrari's age, with whom the aging composer had become infatuated. We were reminded of the similar situation in which Janacek found himself, though the music that composer wrote inspired by his muse had genuine personality and quality.

The solo writing in Wolf-Ferrari's substantial work is virtually ever-present, and cruelly demanding. Psychologists might find in it a means of exerting sexual domination over his innamorata, but whatever the case, the exciting young violinist Francesca DeGo rose to the challenge miraculously. She unflinchingly climbed the stratospheres into which the composer repeatedly sent her, her intonation had a steely accuracy tempered by gorgeous tone from her full-throated violin, and her virtuosity encompassed all that Wolf-Ferrari wrung from his soloist.

Conducted by Rego's husband, Daniele Rustioni, the CBSO collaborated with empathy and a real sense of synchronisation created by this marital duo. Fabulous performance, shame about the content. But DeGo's encore allowed us to concentrate entirely upon her musicianship and stunning technique, as she spectacularly encompassed the fearsome demands of Paganini's 24th Caprice.

The rest of this all-Italian programme showed just how persuasive Rustioni is as a conductor, and how enthusiastically the CBSO responded. Wagner's Tristan und Isolde Prelude (the opera's Act Two was completed in Venice) had the clarity of chamber music, Mark O'Brien's bass clarinet tellingly delineated, Respighi's lavish The Fountains of Rome was brilliant, but also subtle in its woodwind contributions, and Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony was given with a verve, attention to detail and sweeping grasp of structure which makes me wonder whether Rustioni might well prove an estimable Mahler conductor.



Birmingham...

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