

March 31, 2014

Unforgettable!



The Hindu

Throughout the evening, the musicians revelled in the vivid and colourful resonances of the works they played, producing them with heft yet harmony. Photo: M. Vedhan

The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra came calling in the city for the first time. And they brought with them an evening of pure, limpid magic

It was a weekend night in Chennai but the audience at the Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert Hall sat poised on the edge of Europe. When the BBC's Scottish Symphony Orchestra (SSO) played the opening bars of Felix Mendelssohn's overture *The Hebrides* — also known as *Fingal's Cave* after the epic hero in James Macpherson's poem — it brought alive stretches of white beaches, ocean waves, rugged caves and lonely moors.

Mendelssohn is said to have been so overwhelmed when he visited the cave off the west coast of Scotland that his lyrical theme suggests its stunning splendour, solitude and the sweep of the waves. The piece's distinctive colourings were proclaimed by the reedy woodwinds and smooth strings creating a beautiful cross-current of sound.

A sound that the Glasgow-based SSO has made its own since it was formed in 1935. A key contributor to the BBC's broadcasting and cultural role and a recipient of the Royal Philharmonic Society Award for best orchestra, the nearly-70-member strong SSO performed with players from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland at the concert presented by the Madras Seva Sadan.

The evening's music was conducted by internationally acclaimed composer-conductor James Macmillan, CBE. Macmillan is the creator of diverse musical works inspired by both his Celtic heritage and his Catholic faith. Under his guidance the orchestra strove not just for perfect execution but emotionally traversed some of the best of classical music.

The overture established early on in the repertoire the warm richness that glorifies much of orchestral music. Through lashing flurries and intricately-spun melodies the strings, the horns and the timpani showcased the haunting main theme.

The next piece Mozart's *Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major* (nicknamed 'Turkish') was written in 1715 and features a distinctive fast-slow-fast melodic structure. But what it showcased better was the prowess of the soloist for the evening, Nicola Benedetti, one of the most sought-after violinists of her generation. A gifted artiste since childhood and trained by the legendary Yehudi Menuhin, Benedetti was awarded an MBE in 2013.

The 'Allegro Moderato' opened the piece with an expressive range of notes that briefly stalled to allow the soloist to slip into the piece tenderly. Benedetti's Gariel Stradivarius violin (made in 1717) sang through the 'Adagio', soaring over a whispering orchestral accompaniment, underlining Mozart's genius for poetry. Her fingers climbed the strings to play both sonata and operatic sounds. They then launched into pizzicato (plucking) in the 'Presto', a beautiful minuet, with the violins, violas, cellos and double basses rising and falling till they all joined Benedetti in the Turkish march with its leaping themes, exotic intervals and gypsy rhythm.

Benedetti delighted the audience when she returned after a sustained applause to team up with violinist Gongbo Jiang, a student of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. The two played 'Leaving Lerwick Harbour', a charming duet by the Scottish folk fiddler Willie Hunter, where elegiac lines fluttered and settled dreamily over the audience.

Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 4 in F Minor*, a 43-minute four-movement piece that rounded off the concert, was written in the years that saw a downward spiral in the composer's life. And so, the first movement is full of brass shrieks underlining the hold that Fate had on the composer's life. The second movement had a melancholic oboe lead the tune, in the third the strings plucked their way to a hammering finish. The fourth movement with the cymbals and bravura flourishes by the percussion ended with the crystal notes of the triangle. This was a piece that demanded sheer physical dexterity, and the orchestra rose to the occasion.

The programme over, it was time to celebrate Scotland's favourite son Robert Burns, which Benedetti did with a rendition of 'My Love Is Like A Red Red Rose' interpreting its place in their national consciousness with clarity, lushness and precision.

Throughout the evening the musicians revelled in the vivid and colourful resonances of the works they played, producing them with heft yet harmony. And part of that charm came from the conductor and soloist who performed like no other. The concert, much like Scotland's other famous export, was sweet, smooth and sublime.