

Overseas performers keep their cool to transport audiences to world of bold, new horizons

Leonidas Kavakos/David Et Jonathas/Calder Quartet/Orchestre des Champs-Élysées

WEEK two of Edinburgh International Festival, and the musicians flocking from overseas just kept on coming – some to delight, others to perplex (well, slightly). Greek-born violinist **Leonidas Kavakos** was in town to play Szymanowski's Second Violin Concerto with the LSO and Valery Gergiev – an intense, full-blooded performance – but his first chance to shine was in a Queen's Hall recital with Russian pianist Nikolai Lugansky.

And shine he did – eventually. He'd chosen an enterprising programme – Brahms coupled with Janáček, Stravinsky and Respighi – but he seemed to take a while to fully warm to it. It was as if he was determined not to over-perform, with the result being that his interpretations, although vivid and beautifully articulated, sometimes felt somewhat disengaged. Lugansky, however, was limpid luminosity throughout.

There were moments of pure poetry in Kavakos's Janáček Sonata, too, but it was hardly played with the white-hot passion that the piece surely demands. He was similarly clean and clear in the Stravinsky *Duo Concertant* (which can handle a bit of cool objectivity), but it took until the concluding passacaglia of the Respighi Sonata for Kavakos to unleash the power he's capable of.

Similarly, the EIF's second big staged opera – Charpentier's *David Et Jonathas*, flown in from Aix-en-Provence – felt a bit underwhelming on the night, although its themes rolled over and over in the mind long after the show had ended. It came courtesy of early music specialists Les Arts Florissants, under William Christie in the pit, and their playing was well-nigh faultless. Their remarkable responsiveness to Charpentier's supple, sensuous music brought a real thrill. And sensuous it certainly was. This might have been a Biblical tale – with giant-killing shepherd boy David invited into King Saul's home, where he befriends Saul's son Jonathas



String fellows: the Calder Quartet from the US, above, and Greek-born violinist Leonidas Kavakos



– but German director Andreas Homoki's modern-dress production made no bones about the true nature of the relationship between its two title characters. A couple of stolen kisses felt entirely natural, however – touching rather than shocking.

Tenor Pascal Charbonneau was at the top of his range in the haute-contre role of David – the evident vocal strain brilliantly captured the high-tensile volatility of his character, but sometimes it just didn't sound very nice. Soprano Ana Quintans was all youthful ardour as Jonathas, though, and Scottish tenor Neal Davies made a pugnacious Saul.

But it was Paul Zoller's ingenious set design that was the production's most striking feature, placing the action inside wooden boxes that miraculously expanded or shrank from scene to scene, and even moved and multiplied as the tale unfolded. But despite the simplicity and elegance of its all-wood design, the production could probably have done with more colour and variety to clarify its sometimes opaque plot. Still, things sharpened into focus in the second half to create a poignant and beautifully realised conclusion.

Back in the Queen's Hall, the California-based **Calder Quartet** gave us a chance to take the pulse of the US string scene, and if their inci-

sive yet genial performances are anything to go by, it's in very good health. It was in the concert's two contemporary works that the players really excelled. ... *toward sunrise and the prime of light...* by young US composer Andrew Norman was a study in rapture describing a Roman dawn, and given a passionate performance. But the Calder Quartet's take on Thomas Adès's *Arcadiana* was something very special, cool and precise, yet also filled with colour and pungent poetry – an unforgettable performance. They had the measure of each of Adès's vivid miniatures describing idyllic scenes and watery landscapes: viola player Jonathan Moerschel produced just the right banded sound in the "tango mortale", and together they summoned an extraordinary aviary of birdsong in the *Magic Flute*-inspired second movement.

Elsewhere, they were genial to a fault: their opening Mozart *Dissonance Quartet* glowed with a twinkle in its eye, but the closing Men-



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delssohn *F Minor Quartet*, written shortly after the death of the composer's sister, felt too good-natured to be truly grief-stricken.

From America to Belgium, and in the Usher Hall, Ghent-born conductor Philippe Herreweghe showed what insights historical authenticity can bring when applied not to Bach or Mozart, but to Brahms and Bruckner. His **Orchestre des Champs-Élysées**, playing on instruments of the late 19th century, certainly had character, with a rasp to the horns, prominent woodwind and crisp timpani, and it brought entire new flavours to the concert's two major Bruckner pieces, sweet and sour by turns. But it also tended towards the over-assertive, and sometimes drowned out the otherwise strong Collegium Vocale Ghent chamber choir in the joyous Bruckner *Te Deum*.

Herreweghe gave a striking account of the Bruckner Ninth Symphony, a death-infused piece the composer left incomplete when he died, with two searing slow movements bookending a brutal scherzo, made all the more piquant by the acidic tang of the orchestral sound. Yet despite the passion and grandeur, there was still a certain sense of detachment, as if being faithful to a style were more important to Herreweghe than the meaning of the music itself.

Coolness and distance seemed a recurring theme with these four EIF international visitors – but, after all, bringing fresh new perspectives on music both familiar and little-known is what it's all about. **fw**

Edinburgh International Festival runs until 2 September. eif.co.uk

Distance no problem

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