

MUSIC
BERGEN
PHILHARMONIC
ORCHESTRA

USHER HALL, EDINBURGH

★★★★

IT WAS the Bergen Philharmonic's Edinburgh debut, marking the start of a seven-date UK tour, and what an impression they made. Clearly an international band, both in look and sound, they combine a US-style brilliance with the characterful woodwind and brass you'd associate more with central European orchestras and a rich, glossy sheen to the strings.

Under Andrew Litton's precise yet energetic direction, they pulled off a thrilling account of Richard Strauss's arch-Romantic, autobiographical *Ein Heldenleben*. A vast exercise in egotism it might be (the "hero's life" Strauss depicts is clearly his own), but Litton's scorching reading turned it into a true concerto for orchestra, allowing

the individual Bergen players to shine with a remarkable rhythmic suppleness and freedom. Concert master David Stewart sparkled in his lengthy solo depicting Strauss's wife Pauline, and percussion and brass really let rip as Strauss portrayed his battles with his critics.

There was quite a mismatch between the sometimes clangourous playing of young Norwegian pianist Christian Ihle Hadland and the gossamer sounds that Litton conjured from the orchestra.

The ponderous tempos that Hadland doggedly stuck to seemed to have Litton straining at the leash – although there was no denying the pianist's remarkable dexterity and engaging sincerity. The concert's opener, however – Delius's Ibsen-inspired *On the Mountains* – showed what heights of expression the Bergen players could find in even modest music.

DAVID KETTLE