

Shining a light on fresh ideas

MUSIC
**RSNO/KRISTJAN JÄRVI/
ANOUSHKA SHANKAR**

USHER HALL, EDINBURGH

★★★★

IT FELT a bit like a magic show – at first, anyway. With the Royal Scottish National Orchestra on stage and tuned, the lights dimmed, then went out completely. When they glimmered again, conductor Kristjan Järvi had miraculously appeared on the podium, baton ready for the first piece – Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*.

With an atmospheric glow shining on the Usher Hall's organ, and subdued stand lights for the RSNO players, it all felt like a bit of a gimmick – until you realised the hushed, reverential attention that the staging encouraged from the audience.

Just like the unconventional (or let's admit it – challenging) content of the concert as a whole – two slow, spiritual-sounding pieces by Estonian mystic Pärt colliding with the East-meets-West craziness of Ravi Shankar's Second Sitar Concerto – this was the RSNO going out on a limb, trying something new, engaging with listeners in unexpected ways, and succeeding spectacularly.

But back to that opening Pärt piece. Järvi was a study in poise, shaping each slow-moving chord with expert precision, and the RSNO strings responded with cool elegance, delivering a remarkable range of tone as Pärt's inexorable, hypnotic music traced its imposing arch of sound. It was impeccable, and although Järvi – and the evocative staging – might

have been a little too eager to stress the music's aura of holiness, it kept the audience spellbound.

Pärt's Third Symphony is an earlier piece, and less immediately mystical, but Järvi relished its curious, medieval-sounding harmonies, and made a virtue of its baldly fragmentary structure.

Indeed, it felt more like a concerto for orchestra, with each RSNO section rising to the symphony's challenges with utter conviction and due seriousness, as well as superb control – timpanist Dominic Hackett's ever-quickening drumroll in the second movement was one of the performance's many moments of strange, archaic magic.

But many had come to see Anoushka Shankar, daughter of sitar legend Ravi, playing his Second Sitar Concerto, *Raga-Mala*. It's not easy marrying the subtle, pitch-bending sweetness of a sitar with the weight of a symphony orchestra, and indeed, much of the concerto kept them separate – but there was no doubting the effortless virtuosity and disarming sincerity of Shankar's playing.

She only seemed to come fully into her own, though, in the last movement's thrilling evocation of a traditional Indian gat, with the RSNO's Stuart Semple doing a thoroughly creditable tabla impression on congas. Her encore – a gently shimmering account of her own evening-raga *Monsoon* – rounded off a bewitching and hugely rewarding evening of fresh, provocative ideas.

DAVID KETTLE

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