

SCO set for an adventure as Emelyanychev takes charge



David Kettle

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra unveiled its 2019/20 season last week with a new logo, a bracing series of concerts and – most striking of all – a new principal conductor, Maxim Emelyanychev. The young Russian is a bundle of energy and enthusiasm who has struck up a warm rapport with the orchestra after just two concerts together (both, incidentally, gigs where Emelyanychev stood in for other conductors at short notice). And he is clearly arriving with some new ideas of his own for how things might be.

“If you only look at things seriously, every concert should be an overture, a concerto and a symphony. We’re a little bit academic – we buy a ticket, we go to the concert, in the interval we drink champagne, then it’s the second half and maybe encores. But to do things like in a museum is not interesting.”

What differences does he have in mind? “We have to be modern. I’m not sure in a few years whether concerts with intervals will even exist. We need to invent something different.” Such as? “In Baroque opera performances, in the intervals there were performed intermedii. Music was everywhere, all the time – there was no silent time. Maybe I should ask players in kilts to play hornpipes during the intervals! We will experiment with concert formats. I don’t know what we’ll come up with.”

It’s this freewheeling spirit of adventure that makes Emelyanychev such an exciting – and perhaps unpredictable – prospect for the SCO. Maybe unsurprisingly, however, the performances planned for his first season are somewhat more restrained. Even so, in his first concerts, on 14-16 November, he intentionally sets out his stall across a broad programme of music, one that exploits the breadth of the orchestra’s abilities, bringing together Mozart’s *Jupiter Symphony*, Prokofiev’s *Second Violin Concerto*, and the UK premiere of French composer Philippe



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Harsent’s *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. “It was written just three years ago, and it’s very nice music – written with notes, not with funny symbols!” Emelyanychev says of the Harsent premiere. “We’ll do a maximum of modern music, but it’s a question of balance. Audiences want to listen to Mozart and Beethoven, but we have a responsibility to inform them too.”

Emelyanychev indulges his own passion for Baroque music in two programmes later in the season, which he directs from the harpsichord. One, in January, offers

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dances by Lully and Rameau, the other, in March, brings together Vivaldi’s *Gloria* with concertos for rare instruments such as chalumeaux and tromba marina. Both, he says, are intended to be fun: “We can even blur the lines between popular, classical and folk music.”

Emelyanychev has a strong history of period performance, notably with Swiss ensemble Il Pomo d’Oro, of which he’s been chief conductor since 2016. “I’m completely on period instruments and historic performance practice,” he explains. “But I really like the SCO’s mix of historic and modern instruments. Maybe some time

we’ll do performances that are all-period or all-modern – I don’t know yet. For me, at the moment it’s more important how we perform and how we interpret.”

Emelyanychev also takes part in the SCO’s four-concert Beethoven symphony cycle, celebrating in 2020 the 250th anniversary of the composer’s birth (and complemented by a similar cycle from the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra). “I’m not doing all of them,” he explains, “but I’m doing my favourites, numbers 6 and 7.” The rest are taken up by Andrew Manze and Emmanuel Krivine.

Indeed, though pivotal, Emelyanychev’s concerts form just one strand in what promises to be a rich new season from the SCO. Among other highlights, Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto – in Scotland just last week with the orchestra – is featured artist across three concerts; London-born Edinburgh graduate Anna Clyne is the orchestra’s new associate composer; and marking chorus director Gregory Batsleer’s ten years in the role, there’s a wealth of choral music. Even the SCO’s charismatic principal bassist Nikita Naumov gets to shine in the UK premiere Peter Eötvös’s new bass concerto *Aurora*, an SCO co-commission. It’s an exciting prospect all round – and get set, no doubt, for further innovations in seasons to come. ■