

The Mahler Players: Strathpeffer Pavilion - 18th September 2014

The misty nature of the day, the lush autumnal woodland and the Spa setting of Strathpeffer all combined together to provide a suitable backdrop for an evening of Austro-Germanic music performed by local group – the Mahler Players. As well as Strathpeffer this biannual tour by the group also visited venues in Dornoch and Nairn.

The Mahler Players are a collection of mainly locally based musicians, both amateur and professional, led and conducted by Tomas Leakey. The group is also supplemented by young Scottish vocalists– in the case of this performance by the baritone Douglas Nairne and the mezzo-sopranoist Laura Kelly McInroy.

The group specialise in performing mainly the works of Gustav Mahler and the set of compositions presented during the evening explored the links between Mahler, Richard Wagner and Arnold Schoenberg. Both Schoenberg and Mahler were heavily influenced by Wagner, and Schoenberg and Mahler both patronised each other.

The evening began with an extremely atmospheric rendition of Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*. This work is cyclical in nature – starting out very softly, rising to a crescendo and then fading softly away. The music echoed the environment outside - casting up images of mists, forests, wildlife and natural sounds. The instruments became, amongst other things, water vapour, birdsong and rumbles of thunder.

This was followed by *Five Orchestral Pieces* composed by Schoenberg. Schoenberg's music can sometimes be a bit discordant, but in the small scale ensemble size of the Mahler Players it becomes very accessible. One of the real interests of the Players is that you can see the compositional engine working in front of you. This element is often lost in grander sized orchestras.

After a short interval the Players were joined by Miss McInroy and Mr Nairne for a selection of nine songs, sung in the original German, from Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (The Magic Horn of Youth). The Pavilion lent a stately home drawing room ambience to proceedings. You could image a big fire at one end of the room with the orchestra providing backing for the singers of a set of Romantic songs with titles such as: *Das Irdische Leben* (Earthly life), *Revelge* (Reveille) and *Trost im Unglück* (Consolation in misfortune) – which brought the evening to a close. Miss McInroy and Mr Nairne sang very pleasingly both in unison and as soloists.

Mr Leakey and his team are to be congratulated on selecting and constructing an extremely well balanced programme – starting very gently, with a rousing middle section, rounded off by a selection of songs which varied in tempo.

This is the first time this reviewer has seen the Mahler Players and on the merits of tonight's proceedings they join the likes of Music Fyne and the Troilus Ensemble as one of the jewels in the crown of the renaissance of specialist local music. Get out and see them if you can, you will be well rewarded.