



Classical music

Review

English Baroque Soloists: Mozart and Haydn review – historical hipsters cut loose in captivating style



St Martin-in-the-Fields, London

John Eliot Gardiner's groundbreaking orchestra are as precise and sharp as ever, but are miraculously re-energised when joined by violinist Isabelle Faust and violist Antoine Tamestit

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John Eliot Gardiner founded the groundbreaking period-instrument outfit the English Baroque Soloists 46 years ago and has been conducting them ever since. That's well over half his own lifetime – not to mention longer, I'd hazard, than many of the current members have been alive. It's an extraordinary track record. Historically informed performance, as it's now known, has inevitably changed in that time. Fewer socks'n'sandals, for a start, and more cropped trousers and interesting haircuts: HIP has become hipster. It's now also mainstream. Chances are, if you hear any top-drawer orchestra playing classical or baroque repertoire these days, they'll be incorporating sounds and stylistic touches introduced by the EBS.

There's still nothing like a live encounter with the real deal. Impossibly earthy bass, horns at their most metallic, string-playing with teeth: we had all this and more in the opening minutes of Haydn's Symphony No. 84. The minuet was so rustic you could practically hear the mud on its boots. No note was left unmarked, no phrase started without emphasis. The sound quality was exquisite - a blend presumably born of Gardiner's exceptional level of control over and commitment to the ensemble. But as a whole it felt stifling, expressive mannerism threatening to overwhelm the simplicity of the symphony's most beautiful moments.

Mozart's glorious Symphony No. 36 ("Linz") was a different matter. Yes, there were timpani strokes sharp enough to take your hand off, deliciously piquant woodwind and brass, plus strings given to almost euphoric scrubbing in the fast-and-furious finale. But, now standing, the orchestra - and the score - finally had some space to breathe and for some subtler contrasts.

That transformation came courtesy of the programme's middle work: Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante, with violinist [Isabelle Faust](#) and violist [Antoine Tamestit](#). From the soloists' first spellbinding octave emergence out of the tutti texture, via the mortified tone colours eked out by Faust and matched by Tamestit in the sinewy second movement, to the miraculously re-energised sound of the last, this was captivating. Both soloists revelled in long lines, their expressive ease contagious; the orchestra audibly relaxed. It's hard to imagine this piece played better.

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