

Lyatoshynsky's symphony of 1951 is equally emotive, in a heroic, military way. Its noble title "Peace shall Defeat War" didn't save the symphony from being banned by the Soviet authorities, but listening to this performance it was hard to see what could have offended them. The terrifying tumult of war evoked at the outset was soon softened by a stoically sad Ukrainian folk melody, and this fundamental contrast animated all four movements, mingled with other elements: desolation in the slow movement, a surprisingly Viennese sweetness in the scampering third, and a sense of major-key optimism finally winning out in the finale.

Karabits's shrewd variety of pace and terrific playing from the now thoroughly alert orchestra couldn't disguise the fact that the endless repeating patterns in Lyatoshynsky's piece did eventually seem hectoring. But there was something winning in the music's ingenuous lyricism and determined idealism. One came away understanding why this symphony is much beloved in its native land. **IH**

Hear this concert on BBC Radio 3 on Jan 17 at 7.30pm and for 30 days thereafter on BBC Sounds

English Baroque Soloists, St Martin-in-the-Fields ★★★★★



John Eliot Gardiner conducts the English Baroque Soloists at BBC Proms in September 2021 | CREDIT: BBC/Chris Christodoulou

There was a time forty years ago when John Eliot Gardiner and his English Baroque Soloists made 18th century music seem edgy, as far as Bach and Mozart can ever seem edgy. The wiry sound of the violins, expressive in the way a whippet-thin dancer is expressive,

the tangy sound of old-style oboes and bassoons, the whooping, slightly wonky-sounding 18th century horns, the clattering kettle-drums – all this seemed thrillingly new. At the front, the intense, unsmiling “Gigi” urged the players to fill the music with dancing energy.

Have he and the players mellowed since then, or is it just that we’ve become used to that extraordinary sound? Probably a bit of both. Last night, Gardiner was all smiles, as were the players. The sound was as fascinatingly coloured as ever, but seemed more generous and less sharp-edged. And the players actually looked as if they were enjoying themselves, which wasn’t always the case in the past. It helped that the programme was made for smiles. It consisted of Haydn’s radiant and witty Symphony No 84, the grand but playful Symphony No 36 by Mozart and, sandwiched between them, Mozart’s heavenly double concerto for violin, viola and orchestra – the Sinfonia Concertante.

One of the satisfying things about the concert was the way the exact central point of the triptych – the slow movement of Mozart’s concerto – was also the evening’s emotional core. It’s an utterance of tragic desolation, in which it’s hard to disentangle the heart-breaking beauty of the music from the arching sadness of the melody and the harsh harmonic clashes between the violin and viola. The two soloists, violinist Isabelle Faust and violist Antoine Tamestit, caught both aspects to perfection. The cadenza (solo spot) when the orchestra fell silent to allow them to lament together was the evening’s perfect moment.

The other movements were as brilliant and energised as the slow movement was desolate, Gardiner and the orchestral players alert yet tactful in supporting the soloists’ impetuous, enamoured dialogue. As for the symphonies, their major-key optimism was inflected by numerous subtleties, such as the rough peasant energy of the Minuet in Haydn’s symphony, and the surprising final section of the slow movement, where oboes bassoons and horns spun a luxuriously long ending, like a florid signature at the end of a poem. The grandeur of Mozart’s symphony sometimes gave way to moments of almost romantic mystery, which Gardiner and the players made sure we noticed. In all an evening of pure joy, which cast a glow over a damp January evening. **IH**

The English Baroque Soloists and Monteverdi Choir perform Bach’s St Matthew Passion at St Martin-in-the-Fields on 24 April Monteverdi.co.uk

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