

## LONDON MOZART PLAYERS

Queen Elizabeth Hall  
London

Britain's most venerable chamber orchestra has reinvented itself several times. A victim of its own success in pioneering intimate Haydn and Mozart, it first had to keep up with newer bands, such as the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, and then saw the period-style movement steal its toys. It tried going contemporary, with mixed results, though it built up one of the best woodwind sections in London. It has held on to this through a few personnel changes, going by this showing, while the violins have caught up.

Now the London Mozart Players are directed by Andrew Parrott, whose professional roots are in early music, and the wheel of fortune has turned again. The programme showed some confusion of aims. As a Prom it would have been intriguing enough to pack out the Albert Hall, never mind that Elgar sat alongside Mozart. But in the band's South Bank season it got nowhere near filling a smaller space, and if the presence of a commissioned premiere was the reason, it was easy to see why.

Ian Wilson had written the orchestra a marimba concerto. An up-and-coming name, a spectacular solo instrument, it should have been fine. But what might have leavened a new-music festival came over as garrulous and pallid here, its excitement concentrated in one moment. Through two fast, light sections the solo part went non-stop, with little variety of texture or dynamics, for all the flair Pedro Carneiro gave it.

Suddenly it went dramatic, tremolo and sustained - an eruption visited three times, then with marimba alone for a fourth to preface an angry build-up, fading again and echoed by a bell. The best music in the work, too late. More confidence in the orchestra's fragments of

counter-melody might have helped, but this was a symptom of a wider cultural problem. Composers can build careers on orchestras' lack of confidence in contemporary music and its easy exploitation by persuasive publishers; the result is stacks of pieces nobody plays again.

Elgar's *Serenade* had shown the strings' finesse, though the

cellos needed another desk to sing through, and despite fine details it was buttoned-up. The heart of this concert was Mozart, including a rousing performance of Symphony No 39. The main event was Bernard d'Ascoli's visit to play the Piano Concerto in A, K488.

D'Ascoli's playing is always special. A fine example of the

dictum that pianists placed second or third in the Leeds competition have more character and artistry than most of the winners, d'Ascoli uses his long fingers to pursue the French virtues of clarity, sparkle and balance at an ideal tempo. More personally, every note of the intense slow movement was highly charged while maintaining an

operatically lyrical line, so that even the bare outline of the melody at the end felt sufficient.

After half an hour of Mozart heaven, five minutes of distilled and concentrated solo Chopin - Chopin the French classicist rather than the Polish nationalist - made a nicely judged choice of encore.

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