

philharmonia orchestra

James Ehnes Interview

Audio Extract – Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto

James Ehnes – Violinist

It's something I'm looking forward to a lot, because the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto is one of my favourite pieces. It's a piece that has had a prominent place in my life and my career, and I've not played it in London. So it's something that I think should be a lot of fun. For a violinist, the Tchaikovsky is one of the most fun pieces to play because it really shows off everything that the violin is good at. It's got lyricism, it's got incredible technical demands, it's great for the soloist and it's great for the orchestra, it's great for the conductor. It's an ideal piece with which to show off all the various facets of what we do.

It was a piece that was always around when I was a little kid. I grew up with a lot of music around me, my father's a musician, my mother has a ballet school, so there was always lots of music there as well. I don't know when I would have first heard the Tchaikovsky but when I first really listened to it I remember it was about 5th or 6th Grade at school, so I was about 9 or 10. It really had an enormous appeal to me from the beginning. I think it's a very unusual piece in a certain sense. When you know the piece well you think of it as, well maybe it's not fair to say bombastic, but a big powerful, virtuosic showpiece. Rip-roaring, big trumpet fanfares, that's the impression a lot of people have. But when you discover that piece for the first time and really listen to it, the opening is so gentle and so unassuming; it's impossible to know what's going to come from that. I think that the concerto has amazing moments of intimacy that I think that are absolutely as important to its musical message as all the very extrovert and virtuosic writing.

I think Tchaikovsky's music in general has a special place in the concert hall. It's endlessly entertaining and it's the type of music that I think people that are not necessarily regular concertgoers can often really immediately gravitate towards Tchaikovsky's music. It does have an immediate appeal. But also, it has endless layers and amazing depth to it that I think will fascinate musicians through the course of their career.

One thing that I have a real issue with is, it seems to be a popular stance these days in the music industry that 'Haven't we had enough of this and haven't we had enough of this. We've heard this piece so many times and what is the point of playing this piece again or what's the point of recording this piece again?' Certainly the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto I think has taken criticism along those lines. People saying, 'well the last thing we need is another Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto.'

Audio Extract – Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto

When I play the Tchaikovsky concerto, when I perform it once, I can tell you that I've ran it through more than 50 times before the performance and I perform it many many times every year, for many years, and I'm not tired of it. So it makes me sad that there are people out there that say 'oh I'm sick of that, I'm tired of that', well, that's too bad for you but the other thing to consider is that, and the thing that I consider whenever I play the piece is that for most of the people in the audience, they might not have ever heard it at all. Or maybe they've heard it on a recording once, they've never heard it live, or maybe they haven't heard it in 10 years. That's an amazing thing as a performer, to have the chance to bring a wonderful piece of music like that to life for so many people for whom it might be something very new. That's a wonderful to gift to a performer, to have that opportunity, and it's a big responsibility as well. I think that helps keep me fresh each time I play it.