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THE INDEPENDENT

May 30, 2010

Nigel Kennedy / Orchestra of Life, Royal Festival Hall, London

By Reviewed by Edward Seckerson

We'd had the first two movements of Bach's Violin Concerto in E, Nigel Kennedy and his newly formed Orchestra of Life bathed in a haze of blue light and discreetly amplified as befits a gig not a concert. "What's next?" says Kennedy, glancing at his play list nestling between the foldback speakers where adoring fans had also left an assortment of messages and CDs for signature. "What about the third movement?" shouted a man in the front stalls. "Don't like it", retorted Kennedy. And there was no answer to that.

This half of Kennedy's Bach and Ellington gig - a celebration of two great extemporisers and the big crowd-puller of Kennedy's South Bank Polish Weekend - was always going to be a "greatest hits" affair but I for one would happily have forgone some of Nigel's incoherent ramblings (they must have added a good half hour to the proceedings) for the addition of that third movement of the E major Concerto or all three movements of the D minor Concerto for two violins which Kennedy built up with rapturous persuasiveness - "greatest music in the history of the world" - only to cop-out with just the finale. What about that unbelievably beautiful slow movement, Nigel? I know you like that.

But then it's no use pretending that Kennedy will ever play ball (he'll like the football analogy) by the same set of rules as anyone else. And that's fine. But the minute this man starts playing the violin a different kind of energy, a more positive energy, flows and if it's Bach on the stands I for one don't want pick-and-mix or any form of amplification beyond that pure, earthy, life-affirming Kennedy sound - foot stamps and all. And Kennedy's jazz quintet were there, too, a discreet "continuo" at the heart of his lively ensemble - apart from the bongos, that is. Yes, really: Bach with bongos. Why not? Because, as Kennedy might put it, I don't dig this music with someone (or so it sounded) clog-dancing in the background. The best of Kennedy's Bach came when he gently or feistily conversed with his cellist Beata Urbanek-Kalinowska in a group of Two Part Inventions.

And what a stimulating juxtaposition the Duke Ellington second half could have made if the Bach had remained that pure and unadulterated. Still there's no denying what a gifted jazzer Kennedy is and what a six-course meal he and his Quintet plus one - the amazing marimba and vibes player Orphy Robinson - made of the Ellington classic "In a Mellow Tone". There was much more where that came from, Kennedy's electric fiddle whooping up an electric storm of invention. I guess you take him as he comes or not at all.

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