

## Dimitris Sgouros with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in Beethoven's 3rd Piano Concerto (April 2009)

A review by Keith Moore (Columbia University)

### Performance

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# Routine programme, exceptional results

The BBC Orchestra's precision is ideally matched with pianist Dimitris Sgouros' skilful delivery

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**L**EGENDARY conductor George Szell once said it was simple to programme a season but beastly to formulate a concert.

Today modern orchestras tend to make a year of concerts by linking mini-festivals of repertory, often no greater than one, two or three concerts long.

In this context an evening of motley staples from Britten, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky can seem lacklustre. But in their second of two concerts at Megaron the BBC Symphony Orchestra reminded listeners that great concerts are built firstly on inspired performances.

Of course, the BBC Symphony Orchestra's own season is filled with fascinating initiatives like Total Immersion, a series of concert-length explorations of compositions by single contemporary composers, and each year they contribute a dozen or more appearances to the Proms, the mother of all classical music festivals. Yet at their performance on April 25, under the direction of chief conductor Jiri Belohlavek, the works sat alone.

The concert began with Benjamin Britten's *Sea Interludes Op 33a*. The work is a suite of four sea-inspired orchestral pieces drawn from Britten's 1945 operatic masterpiece *Peter Grimes*.

In it the bright spiky sounds of Britten's characteristic orchestral voice mix provocatively with hazy aquatic rhythms. In the final piece the storm finally breaks loose. The orchestra knows the idiom perfectly and only in a flash of pounding brass did their clarity and intonation momentarily waver.

Pulled from their operatic origin and shaped into a formidable symphonic work, these pieces make plain the profound impact Britten's orchestral voice has had on subsequent generations of British composers.

#### Unusual work

Greek pianist Dimitris Sgouros joined the BBC for their performance of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No 3, Op 37*. The work was completed in 1800 and premiered three years later with Beethoven at the piano. The work is unusual for its minor mode and for its bold, nearly raw style of construction and virtuosity.

Concertos of the day sought to provide soloists with graceful, highly idiomatic music and the composers were often the performers themselves. They were writing their own showcases and were



Jiri Belohlavek conducts the BBC Symphony Orchestra with pianist Dimitris Sgouros in the foreground

certain to give themselves the most difficult and intricate-sounding music. It didn't matter if the flair was standard workmanship.

From the beginning Beethoven broke with that tradition. But with his third piano concerto the tendency started to become esoteric. In this the piano writing is most striking. The soloist's music is largely unadorned, but when the extremes of grand gesture and simplicity do emerge they have an awkward way of butting against each other.

In the concerto the scale itself is an important motivic device. So structure and style are perfectly and provocatively conflated. Sgouros was an ideal soloist for the task. He was ready to play the music with striking clarity - exactly as Beethoven himself poised the work.

In the first movement Sgouros realised fast, steep

sets of octaves with near-pedantic linear precision. When the lyrical counter theme finally emerged both soloist and orchestra indulged the heady mood but in a moment of sharpness still captured the fleeting mid-phrase echo of the military opening.

The middle movement begins with a simple melody for the soloist. As the texture builds a luxuriant development of the theme, replete with soloistic trills and tremolandi, becomes increasingly inevitable.

#### Perfectly timed

In awkward surprise the jaunty third movement begins at once, with piano soloist alone. Sgouros' brief pause was perfectly timed.

After such exquisite interplay he seemed to jump impatiently to the next scene. In a final pithy cadenza the soloist recalled once more the simple, lowly scale

and the work spun to conclusion.

The soloist and orchestra played with a rare match of instrumental balance and expressive purpose. The BBC seemed to enjoy the Beethoven as much as the audience. The applause the orchestra members saved for their soloist was a strikingly warm gesture.

In his Lisztian encore Sgouros was able to shine in a rhapsodic composition of enormous technical challenge. The work was designed to astonish and Sgouros did just that, easily transforming difficult finger work into aural opulence.

The programme closed with a powerful performance of Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No 6, Op 74*. Belohlavek gave a clear and gripping account of the score which allowed the BBC Symphony Orchestra's timbral richness and group precision to shine.