

Belfast Telegraph, 25 July 1946

VISIT OF LONDON PHILHARMONIC

BRAHMS SYMPHONY

Erich Leinsdorf, who conducted the London Philharmonic Orchestra on Wednesday afternoon at the first of the three Ulster Hall concerts which are being given in conjunction with C.E.M.A., chose for the occasion a programme that never lacked musical interest though it included no actual novelty.

The Brahms Symphony No.2 in D major, which was the main work of the afternoon, has by no means been overplayed here, and the performance yesterday had a further interest in providing a comparison with the readings of our own conductors. Whether the present performance always got to the heart of Brahms, or gave this work its full stature, might be questioned. It showed on the conductor's part an intimate knowledge of the score, and many a fine turn of phrase which betokened sensitive musicianship. Yet somehow he just failed to infuse the players with the fire necessary to lift the performance out of the routine order.

The reading was often over-elaborate in matters of detail, I thought, and the method was not perhaps altogether judicious on technical grounds, for it demanded from the players a degree of responsiveness that is not so readily forthcoming after the stress of the war years, and particularly so when a comparatively strange conductor is in charge. Nor was the method always the happiest one to choose from the point of view of the music, for it had the effect of drawing undue attention to an essential weakness in this composer – the almost inept way in which he so often makes a transition from one section to another.

These joins, of course, can never be entirely disguised, but a sense of finer continuity can be attained by bringing out the singing quality of the music. Our own conductor, Hamilton Harty, achieved his mastery of Brahms in this way, as he showed so plainly in a performance of this same work in this hall some years ago. There was never a true cantabile style on this occasion, at least in the first two movements, where the need for it is most imperative, and that perhaps was the real reason why the performance just failed to attain its objective. This quality came out much better in the third movement, a charming Allegretto, which was played in a delightful way. Nor was it entirely absent in the finale, a movement which also showed no little appreciation of the composer's humour.

The best playing of the afternoon, however, came in the second part of the programme, in works by Berlioz, Debussy and Tchaikovsky. The *Royal Hunt and Storm* from Berlioz's *The Trojans* may not be great music, but it is written with a supreme mastery of orchestral effect, and it was not the least merit of this performance that it was entirely free from exaggeration. (Mr. Leinsdorf, it may be said in parenthesis, has evidently no use for the tricks of a mere showman.)

The famous Debussy *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, no less masterly in its effect, is considerably more subtle, besides cutting deeper as music. The reading was not, I thought, so deeply poetic as that given by Sargent and the Liverpool Philharmonic in a concert here a few months ago. It was none the less a good performance, with some particularly beautiful playing from the wood-wind section. The concluding *Polacca* of Tchaikovsky's *Theme and Variations* may be a resort to a mere empty brilliance, but there is some very genuine and beautiful music in the earlier sections in the chorale variation, for instance, where the cor anglais is so prominent, and this was a particular beauty in what was probably the best performance of the concert.

This evening's concert, with two important works by Sibelius, will, it is to be hoped, more nearly fill the hall to capacity.

RATHCOL