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MARK BEBBINGTON BROMSGROVE REVIEW

A THOUGHTFUL, ENGROSSING RECITAL FROM MARK BEBBINGTON

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Artrix, Bromsgrove *****

The silence of the Bromsgrove Concerts audience at Mark Bebbington's skilfully-programmed all-Gallic recital was deafening, this most thoughtful of pianists drawing the listeners into the circle of concentration with which he surrounded most of his performances throughout an enthralling evening.

Slightly less than engaging was the Faure D-flat Nocturne with which he opened, somewhat detached, but always with an imaginative command of keyboard timbres, from primary colours in the bass to the pastel tones at the very top of this magnificent Steinway instrument.

But then, following on immediately, came the intellectual and emotional grandeur (never mind the searching Lisztian technique) of Cesar Franck's (okay, he was born in Belgium but France adopted him) Prelude, Choral et Fugue. Bebbington's response to this awe-inspiring work was thoughtful and engrossing, building a tension, not least in the hands-crossing melodic shaping, dispelled at last by the breaking-out of a mighty Fugue.

From cathedral-like solemnity to cheeky wit, when Bebbington was joined by oboist Jenny Wood and bassoonist Richard Tattam in Poulenc's delicious Trio, Mozart with a 20th-century accent. Ensemble between all three was impeccable (attentive eye-contact between the facing woodwinds), almost operatic in effect, and there was plenty of humour mixed with tenderness to relish. Bebbington's forthcoming Poulenc recordings are eagerly anticipated.

Finally came Chopin's irresistible B minor Sonata, presented with a wonderful sense of unity across its four movements. This was a fresh, generous account, aware of the music's almost improvisatory qualities (Chopin hated writing things down), chords glowing richly, fleet passage-work both troubled and spectacular.

Je n'aime pas les encores, but Mark Bebbington gave us a perfect one, Debussy's Clair de Lune casting a magic which died away only reluctantly.

Christopher Morley