John Gough reviews Leon McCawley at Bromsgrove Artrix

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Bromsgrove Concerts' new season opened with a visit from one of our foremost pianists, Leon McCawley, in a highly satisfying programme of the core classical repertoire.

McCawley is a mature and self-possessed artist, whose playing is an intriguing balance of delicacy, detail and drama, and although everything was carefully considered, a feeling of spontaneity permeated the evening.

After the opening Beethoven Variations on a theme of Paisiello (one of many Italian connections throughout his recital), we heard a crisp and dramatic performance of Beethoven's Sonata op. 10/1, an abrupt and dark opening, a poised warm and glowing slow movement, like an inspired improvisation, and a finale full of wit and edge of the seat timing.

Three elegant Mendelssohn Songs without words received no less care, beautifully shaped within a deliberately restricted dynamic range. It was after the interval that McCawley's muscular technique was allowed its freest expression.

Four Rachmaninov Preludes received aristocratic, magisterial performances; foreground effortlessly separated from background amid the torrent of notes, and as impressive as the climaxes were, even more so was the subsequent gradual descent from passion to reflection.

The highlight was Liszt's Petrarch Sonnet 123. Rapt, still music, with its pre-echoes of the love music from Tristan. I am temperamentally allergic to the over-insistent rhetoric and crowd-pleasing aspects of some of Liszt's work, and so I found it odd to hear such a fastidious artist apply his Apollonian gifts to the Dionysian bombast and acrobatics of the finale – Venezia e Napoli. Even here McCawley couldn't help but find purely musical solutions to the many pictorial challenges in the piece, ranging from the dark and sinister ripples of Venezia, to the repeated note mandolin impressions and more, in the astonishing pianistic feats of the final Tarantella. Premeditated yet daredevil playing.