

May 2026 – York Barbican Concert Review

YORK Barbican's orchestra-in-residence ended its season with a mixed bag centred around Bruch's First Violin Concerto – by far the most famous of the three he wrote – alongside two overtures from opposite ends of the Romantic era, plus Britten's Sea Interludes and Ravel's La Valse. It was all very tastefully delivered but lacked the final punch that a meatier second half – with a symphony perhaps – might have produced.

Bradley Creswick made his name hereabouts as leader for 25 years of the Royal Northern Sinfonia, of which he is now Leader Emeritus. He lollops onto the stage with a mischievous smile that radiates both surprise and delight, but his casual demeanour belies a fluent technique and a seriousness of intent. He immediately took a slower tempo than that suggested by the opening chords: his entire approach to the introduction was leisurely, liberally laced with rubato, and his mellow tone in the slow movement was ideally suited to its tear-jerking melodies. It was not until the jaunty rhythms of the finale that he really let loose, bouncing crisply through both main melodies and accelerating with panache through the coda. Accompanying his relatively wayward tempos, especially in the first two movements, would have tested a lesser conductor than Simon Wright. However, the orchestra stayed in remarkably close attendance, even matching Creswick's energy in the finale.

Each half of the afternoon was prefaced with an overture. The horn quartet at the start of Weber's *Der Freischütz* was stylish, near faultless in fact. Not to be outdone, the violins were positively spine-tingling in the Vivace section.

Creswick humbly took a seat with them after the interval, when Verdi's overture to *La Forza del Destino* offered the brass a chance to show their mettle, especially in the final prolonged crescendo – a trick Verdi had learned from Rossini.

Britten aligned four of the six sea interludes in his opera *Peter Grimes* into a suite, to which he appended the passacaglia that falls between the two scenes of Act 2. In many ways, the different moods of the interludes reflect varied aspects of Grimes' own volatile personality. Playing them as a suite relies on the chameleon qualities of an orchestra. Two aspects here predominate. The woodwinds need to be highly flexible, running around seemingly in circles while the rest of the orchestra remains largely calm, as in 'Dawn'. He also uses an extensive percussion section. Wright handled both these superbly. He also brought extra emphasis to the dark underlay of 'Moonlight', while benefiting from the aplomb of his viola soloist in the Passacaglia, and encouraging some real shrieking from his winds in 'Storm'.

Ravel's 'choreographic poem' *La Valse* was at first rejected by Diaghilev as not being balletic enough, but was eventually staged. Above all, it needs to dance, particularly in its apotheosis when its constituent parts seem to disintegrate. After conjuring a passionate

mood for the central section, Wright was not afraid to launch into stridency in the final frenzied chords when the waltz seems to self-destruct.

It was both brave and dramatic, as it should be.

Martin Dreyer
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