

EDO — encore

'The improbable we can manage; the impossible may take a little longer' was a thought which came vividly to mind when the programme for last summer's concert by the European Doctors Orchestra in Poznan was fixed — Beethoven Nine, no less. Some cackled in amused disbelief at the choice; others started practising at once; while others muttered about cheek and impudence and sheer bloodychutzpah as they remembered that even the great Toscanini did not dare to record it until his eighties — and here was a bunch of amateurs proposing to perform it on 3 days of rehearsal. Ever since its founding in 2004, the orchestra has pushed itself to its absolute limits in its attacks on the commanding heights of the symphonic repertoire with a commensurate rise in performing standards beyond anything its founders could have imagined — but this, the *Choral*, the greatest of all symphonic utterances, was surely beyond us. Or was it? Our Polish hosts — who looked after us beautifully, with excellent hotel accommodation and seamless transfers across the city to and from various rehearsal venues — were in no doubt that we could play it for, as they explained, they had managed it 2 years ago: but any optimism went out of the window at our first rehearsal, with the EDO sounding like a tuneless rabble.

As the days went on, entries became more precise; the ensemble became tighter, as did the rhythmic control, and intonation became more certain. Slowly, we began to get the measure of the four huge movements. Some of us were able to play all the notes — even the almost unplayable lower strings passages in the last movement; some of us had occasionally to resort to mime. But by the time we met the choir, we were on the edge of our seats and ready to play for our lives while the choir sang its heart out. At the final rehearsal, though, it was the *Scherzo* — hectic and unstoppable — which nearly did for us. There were problems with the percussion, which prompted the conductor to suggest that the *Scherzo* was too difficult and so we should omit that

movement, at which the orchestra began to seethe with anger. A violinist declared loudly that it was utter nonsense to play only three movements, while another player stood up and declaimed a mixture of 'Once more unto the breach!' and 'We are not interested in the possibility of defeat!', plus assorted Churchilliana — and the conductor hastily withdrew.

We played to a packed house of Polish physicians, the programme of whose meeting included the concert as a finale in the Philharmonic Hall. We began with Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, whose brutal grandeur was diminished by a brisk tempo reducing it almost to the level of a Strauss Waltz. A Polish pianist played Chopin's *Second Concerto* beautifully, although it was rather too restrained for my taste, and then it was the Beethoven. And everything came together; everything came right as the performance developed its own momentum. Rehearsal difficulties were now as nothing in a great unity of purpose and a tireless energy. Deafness may have prevented Beethoven realising the limitations of the human voice but soloists and choir were tireless as they burst forth in the colossal exultation of the last movement, with the EDO on a glorious collective high as we went charging in to the finale. The applause came in great waves as we sagged back, happily exhausted, almost unable to realise what we had achieved — until, unbelievably, we were dragooned into playing the Wagner as an encore!

What next? *Missa Solemnis*, perhaps? But meanwhile, we are in London in November — at the Duke's Hall once again where, in aid of Save the Children, we play Rossini, Mahler, and Rimsky-Korsakov. We hope to see you there.

Michael Lasserson

The European Doctors Orchestra's next concert is on Sunday 15 November, at 3.00 p.m. in the Duke's Hall of the Royal Academy of Music. The programme will include Rossini's overture *William Tell*; Mahler's *Lieder eines Fahrenden Gesellen*, and Rimsky Korsakov's *Scheherezade*

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