

Review: Sandrine Piau and Apollo's Fire at Birmingham Town Hall

May 13, 2014 14:27 | 0 Comments

OPINION

BY NORMANSTINCHCOMBE



Norman Stinchcombe reviews Sandrine Piau and Apollo's Fire at Birmingham Town Hall

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Like the charming lady herself Sandrine Piau's voice is small, bright and absolutely exquisite. In a selection of arias from Handel, Rameau and Vivaldi the French soprano gave a masterclass in baroque style with singing combining elegance, animation and passion.

She caressed Viens Hymen from Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes* with the utmost tenderness, weaving her voice with the plaintive flute accompaniment.

In *Sonno, se pur sei sonno* from Vivaldi's *Tito Manlio* the imprisoned heroine's plea for sleep to "cover my eyes with darkness" could scarcely have sounded more desolate while Piau's repeated cry of *Perche (Why?)* in Alcina's *Ah mio cor!* would have softened the stoniest heart.

Piau excels at inward plangency but also extrovert passion – as her vocal pyrotechnics in Handel's showpiece arias *Il primo ardour* and *Da tempeste* demonstrated.

Apollo's Fire were worthy, and equal, partners bringing a type of American bohemian chic which was a refreshing change from the more staid, often po-faced, British baroque bands.

Led by exuberant flame-haired Jeannette Sorrell, who directed standing at a raised harpsichord, they were flamboyant and fun. And boy, they can play too.

René Schiffer and Stuart Pincombe combined for a rousing rendition of Vivaldi's double cello concerto while Johanna Novom and the band's leader Olivier Braut (if a bit of a dandy and a fabulous fiddler) excelled in Vivaldi's *A minor* concerto for two violins.

Their party piece – Vivaldi's trio sonata *La Folia* arranged as an increasingly frenetic dancing concerto grosso by Sorrell – energetically rounded off a hugely enjoyable concert.

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