

» LONDON

Players both young and well-established introduced new works to the repertoire. **EDWARD BHESANIA** reports



Peter Fisher: stylish instinct

IT'S SOMETHING OF A guilty pleasure to hear Kreisler's confections, and violinist **Peter Fisher** began his recital with pianist Peter Hewitt at St John's, Smith Square, with a trio of them (27 April). The *Tempo di Menuetto in the style of Pugnani* was a good opener, and Fisher struck a careful balance between courtly pomp and easy-going Classicism. Arrangements of

the 'Hymn to the Sun' from Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel* and the 'Danza española' from Falla's *La vida breve* displayed old-world lyricism for which Fisher clearly held affection. Drawing inspiration from Rilke's dark poem 'The Neighbour', Cecilia McDowall's *Strange violin, are you following me?* is a haunting but serene piece, with a Pärt-like hypnotic quality, whose atmosphere Hewitt and Fisher were keenly attuned to in this world-premiere performance. The demanding programme continued with Brahms's Violin Sonata no.2, in which Fisher showed stylish instinct rather than stuffy reverence, and a warmly upholstered tone. The colours changed in Prokofiev's at-times Impressionistic Violin Sonata no.1, and after Fauré's Romance in B flat major, Fisher closed with a spirited rendering of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Figaro Variations* based on Rossini's *Barber of Seville*.

The following evening saw the penultimate Park Lane Group Monday Platform series at the Wigmore Hall, split between violin-and-piano duo **Katie Stillman** and Simon Lane, and the **Rautio Piano Trio**. Stillman took on Beethoven's Violin Sonata in G major op.96 and Prokofiev's Violin Sonata no.2. In the first movement of the former she captured an ardent pastoral quality and impressed with a rich mid-register tone, though the finale seemed under-projected. She was more engaging in the Prokofiev, showing verve in the whirligigging second movement, and she produced bewildering strength and precision in the militaristic finale.

The Rautio Trio introduced a new work, *Syzygy*, by composer and conductor Benjamin Wallfisch (b.1979). The players squared up firmly to the first movement, which breaks up the trio into misaligned independent instruments; while the second movement makes a feature of crashing piano chords and fast string unisons. The energy could have been quelled a touch in Brahms's Piano Trio no.3 op.101, though. If the highlight was the second movement, this was due not only to a fine, limpid touch, but also to a feeling of relief after the very hard-driven first movement: ambitious though it was in sonic scale, it prompted one member of the audience to find a seat further back in the hall.

The Wigmore Hall was also the penultimate stop on California-based **Camerata Pacifica's** seven-stop tour (2 May), featuring an

arrangement for violin and 13 instruments of *Messenger*, the violin concerto by Irish composer Ian Wilson (b.1964). Soloist **Catherine Leonard** weaved her way through a demanding and diverse solo role in a thoughtful and committed performance. But more impressive was the impact of the piece itself, with its brilliantly scored Ravelian evocation of darkly tinged childhood innocence in the second movement. At 30 minutes, *Messenger* is a substantial work and one that any enlightened violinist would surely want in their armoury. A smaller-scale Camerata had already impressed in the Piano Quintet by John Harbison at the opening of the concert, but Wilson's piece was more compelling.

Another visiting ensemble followed at the Wigmore on 4 May, this time Denmark's **Trio con Brio**. It opened with Beethoven's 'Ghost' Piano Trio: the nickname-inspiring second movement could have gained a more suspended effect, but the finale was fast-paced and energetic, and boasted brilliantly attuned violin and cello work. The players reacted instinctively to the weird sound world of Bent Sørensen's *Phantasmagoria*: the theatrical entering of voices in the first movement, the sparseness of gestures in the third movement, the arrested rates of rhythm in the fourth movement and – thrillingly – the delicate play around the borders of sound and silence in the fifth movement. Shostakovich's Piano Trio no.2 and Ravel's Piano Trio showed the Trio con Brio in the best possible light. In the Ravel, one marvelled at the first movement's finely spun delicacy, the long-breathed, languorously hypnotic Passacaglia and above all the disarmingly virtuosic playing overall. There's vigour and panache aplenty in this ensemble, but with solid aesthetic muscle to match.

The biggest guns of the month belonged to the **Takács Quartet** and the group rolled into town with them all-blazing (21 May). In Haydn's 'Rider' Quartet op.74 no.3, the players drew finely wrought lines, wrapped in a well-furnished sound. The craftsmanly balance and melodic shaping in the simple four-part harmony of the second movement was a telling test. Brahms's Quartet in B flat major op.67 closed the concert, and it was marred only by a slightly neurotic approach to the third movement's opening viola solo. In between came the world premiere of the String Quartet no.3 by James MacMillan. The Eastern-sounding chant-like melody of the first movement whipped itself up into an intense frenzy before breaking into a stratospheric spray at the end. The second-movement scherzo and the finale (spotlighting the first violin) were played with equally fastidious preparation.

The **Brodsky Quartet** rounded off the month at Cadogan Hall (28 May). The only modern piece was by Japanese composer Karen Tanaka (b.1961), *At the Grave of Beethoven*. The first movement is inspired by the opening bars of Beethoven's String Quartet in D major op.18 no.3, and the idiom throughout is a ghostly reproduction of ripe Classicism, with the mysterious breath of the 21st century. The Brodsky players gave a penetrating performance, as they had for the concert's opener, Purcell's *Chacony*, in which Daniel Rowland, who joined the quartet as leader last year, established an intimate communication with the other players. In Beethoven's 'Serioso' Quartet op.95, there was some lack of vigour and inner-line clarity in the first movement, but the finale was suitably fleet-footed. A tempestuous streak linked Mendelssohn's F minor String Quartet and Schubert's *Quartettsatz*, but Puccini's *Crisantemi* seemed to hover hesitantly between sorrow and sweetness. ■