

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

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OPINION

BY NORMANSTINCHCOMBE



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

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Sandrine Piau and Apollo's Fire at Birmingham Town Hall

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 Brault (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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