

## LONDON

**Tim Homfray** witnesses a quintet of fine concerto performances

Last autumn the **Czech Philharmonic Orchestra** (CPO) gave an all-Dvořák programme at London's Cadogan Hall (31 October), under the idiomatic direction of the young Czech conductor Jakub Hrůša, in which **Steven Isserlis** joined them for a performance of the B minor Cello Concerto. It must be a particular challenge to perform this music with musicians who have it running in their veins, but Isserlis rose to it with aplomb. He did sound rather under-powered at times, although that might just have been an acoustic anomaly,



Lara St John: played Paganini with a freewheeling panache

but even so the streams of bravura and poetry shone vividly through. There was deep feeling without indulgence, perfectly judged rubato, eloquent vibrato, and a wealth of subtle dialogue with the glorious wind players of the CPO, who all deserve reviews to themselves.

According to **Gil Shaham**, it was Michael Tilson Thomas who urged him to study Berg's Violin Concerto, and they have since been performing it together for some 20 years. They did so again, with the London Symphony Orchestra, at the Barbican Hall on 5 November. For all their long association, there was no facile polished perfection of ensemble in this performance.

In the first movement, particularly, there were places where Shaham pushed energetically against Tilson Thomas's steady direction. Yet overall there was a gentleness to this performance. Shaham brought a sense of lightness and something of the dance to the first movement, warm and generous if not always quite in tune. The second movement was essentially lyrical and restrained, for all its shouts of grief, and the chorale seemed less a new calm than a gentle summation of what had gone before, with Shaham's playing both sumptuous and simple.

**Lara St John**, performing Paganini's Second Violin Concerto at Cadogan Hall on 17 November, demonstrated a taste for schmaltzy expression right from the exaggerated glissandos of the opening phrase, matched by the stabbing accents and vivid phrasing of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Nicolae Moldoveanu. There seemed something very authentic about

it all: this is after all the music of a showman, stylistically a whisker away from the opera house. St John played with a freewheeling panache, slipping on and off the centre of notes as a singer might. She claims a great influence from the Roma people, with whom she has spent some time, and it shows in the feeling of constant improvisation and personalisation of her playing. In the *campanella* finale, and elsewhere, such humdrum constraints as constancy of tempo were clearly of little concern. She performed with a terrifying accuracy to match her theatrical exuberance, much as one imagines the man himself must have done, with fire and a twinkle in his eye, and the Devil's carriage waiting at the door to take him home.

Three days later at the Barbican Hall, **Christian Tetzlaff** took hold of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto (or Violin Concerto no.2 as it said in the programme) by the scruff of the neck and revealed in it layers of raw passion. Right from the opening the playing was fierce, driven and fast, with the London Symphony Orchestra under Daniel Harding matching Tetzlaff in a mightily

vigorous tutti. This was a one-in-the-bar reading, with first beats noticeably more pronounced than third beats, and there were places when it became a bit of a scramble. The flowing passagework of the first movement was powered through in top gear, with no concern for drawing-room elegance. The second subject glistened, but was not indulged. The second movement was a thing of exquisite beauty, although the central section was again treated with muscular urgency. But this was the eye of the storm, and Tetzlaff tackled the finale with bow-rattling dynamism, combining thrilling virtuosity with dark drama. This was heavyweight Mendelssohn,