

✓ ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF  
(November 17, 1983)

BBC WELSH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Conductor: Mariss Jansons. Soloist: John Lill (Piano)

It was a welcome sound to hear the recently enlarged BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra perform a programme that promised some musical substance even though in the last analysis there was a failure of musical nerve.

The concert opened with a performance of *Symphony No. 1 in E minor* by Sibelius and what seem to me to be the strengths and the weaknesses of both orchestra and conductor were evident from the very beginning.

The conductor Mariss Jansons has strong musical credentials. His father was Arvid Jansons, conductor of the Riga Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra (1944-52) and the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra (1952) and the younger Jansons was for a period assistant to the great Yevgeny Mravinsky. Mariss Jansons is currently the principal conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and a permanent conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic. Clearly, though he is still relatively young, Mariss Jansons brought to St. David's Hall considerable experience even if on the evidence of this concert his interpretative gifts do not match his obvious technical ability. Thus it was that the performance of the Sibelius was competent but brusque, with little poetry and subtlety of phrasing. In this he was seconded by the orchestra which played with security but in general without sophistication of tone or phrasing.

John Lill was the vigorous soloist in Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, the performance of which was certainly the highpoint of the evening with the direct and unfussy approach of pianist, orchestra and conductor highlighting the bravura nature and prickly qualities of the work if not the poetic and romantic aspects. To these ears the tone of the piano was unattractive and tended to fall apart and become tinny when played at dynamic levels above forte.

The musical tension of the evening dropped considerably with the last work, the *Italian Caprice* by Tchaikovsky. Where the programming of the concert should have logically led to the performance of a contemporary work by a living composer, the audience was treated to a bit of coarsely served confection.

Mariss Jansons is one of those conductors whose body language does not reflect the sound that is actually being produced so that although his corporal movements suggested that he felt the romantic ebb and flow of the music, the interpretation that one actually heard was dull and uninteresting, lacking both in lushness of string tone and in rhythmic tautness and vigour. Playing percussion solidly and loudly is not the same as playing with rhythmic spring and bounce.

From the top and back of the St. David's Hall the acoustics are such that they help the impact of low and middle range brass, but do little to add sheen to the strings and the woodwind sound distant. From the front of the hall, the strings still lack harmonic richness and impact and the woodwind, brass and timpani sound at unrelated distances. On the night, the acoustics of the hall would seem to me to be such that the Chicago Symphony Orchestra with its exceptional brass, woodwind and percussion sections would sound wonderful, but there remain problems with the balance, blend, definition and proximity of orchestral sound in St. David's Hall.

On the other hand, there is hope that with continued public concerts containing programmes of a high quality under the baton of able and experienced conductors the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra looks set to become a powerful and continuing force in the musical life of the principality.

IFAN PAYNE.