

London Schools Symphony Orchestra, Barbican, London □□□□□

The National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, Symphony Hall, Birmingham □□□□□

Last week brought concerts from two of our wonderful youth orchestras, the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and the London Schools Symphony Orchestra. The latter is not so well known as its senior cousin but deserves plaudits no less. The players are drawn from across London's school system by audition, and simply assembling everyone for rehearsals is a triumph of persuasion and cajoling on the part of the organisation, as it has to compete with all the other demands on the children's time.

Given that fact, the concert by the LSSO at the Barbican on Thursday had a touch of the miraculous. They tackled a programme that in some ways was even more taxing than the one played by the NYO the following day, and certainly a lot darker. It contained three Russian works from the Soviet era, including Schnittke's Viola Concerto, a piece that mingles the composer's intimations of his own mortal illness with the spiritual deracination of the dying days of the Soviet Union. Soloist Lawrence Power summoned a truly desperate intensity, flinging protesting volleys of notes against the orchestra's tread, played with implacable heaviness by the young players under Sian Edwards.

After the interval came Shostakovich's tragic Fifth Symphony. What could these young players have made of the overwhelming sorrow of this music, issuing from the dark time of Stalinism that to them must seem like ancient history? Quite a lot, was the answer given by the performance. The violins etched the haunted high lines of the slow movement with admirable control, and the final movement hit the right tone of grim-faced triumph.

National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain

Compared to that, the NYO's concert at Birmingham's Symphony Hall on Friday seemed almost light, though it wasn't without moments of mystery. One of them came at the very beginning, when sounds of arresting uncanniness from percussion mingled with more familiar harmonies in wind and brass. This turned out to be *Suspended Between Earth and Air* by Lauren Marshall, one of the NYO's resident composers, which was dropped into the programme unannounced.

There were more moments of dark brilliance in Australian composer Brett Dean's *Komarov's Fall*, an evocation of a doomed Soviet space mission, and in Karol Szymanowski's *Symphony No 4*. The symphony's prominent piano part was played by Serbian virtuoso Tamara Stefanovich, who found just the right sinuous exoticism for the slow movement and stamping peasant vigour for the finale. Her brief duets with orchestral leader Leora Cohen were a particular delight.

Then came a surgingly intense performance of Rachmaninov's 2nd Symphony, conductor John Wilson urging the players to be always just ahead of the beat, as if the music could hardly contain its own passion. We hear much about fine youth orchestras overseas, but as these two concerts reminded us, we have much to be proud of back home.

Ivan Hewitt, Daily Telegraph 9/1/17