

London Schools Symphony Orchestra/Sian Edwards – Colas Breugnon Overture &

Shostakovich 5 – Lawrence Power plays Schnittke's Viola Concerto

Thursday, January 05, 2017 Barbican Hall, London

Reviewed by Robert Matthew-Walker for CLASSICAL SOURCE



Programmes by youth orchestras are often no different in their musical challenges than those scheduled by prestigious professional groups, and one is often surprised – not to say astonished – by the standards our young musicians often achieve.

The capital's youth band – the London Schools Symphony Orchestra, drawn from pupils within the M25 – in this Soviet programme (a smiling Stalin on the programme cover), showed they had nothing to fear from comparison with any established ensemble in terms of technical ability and all-round musicianship.

Kabalevsky's Colas Breugnon Overture used to be quite often heard, but it seems to have gone the way of almost all such these days, for reasons which appear to have little to do with making artistic judgements. So it was encouraging to find it opening this programme, and the performance under Sian Edwards was notable for splendid characterisation and brilliance of playing: the LSSO's corporate attack was enormously impressive and rhythmically exciting to secure an exhilarating start.

This six-minute opener was followed by a twelve-minute break as the thirty-five violinists left the platform, to return only after the interval. We twiddled our thumbs whilst Mr Shifter and Co proceeded to prepare the stage for the oddly-constructed group Alfred Schnittke asks for in his (first) Viola Concerto of 1985 (large orchestra without violins, but with piano, harpsichord and celesta).

At length, all was ready for Edwards's return, with Lawrence Power the soloist in this remarkable work. A hostile critic (which I am not) might claim that Schnittke's compositional style is one in which anything can happen, any organic coherence set at naught by a seeming inability to stick to the point. In that regard, even a sympathetic critic (which I attempt to be) might well feel that, once having grasped Schnittke's desire to do the opposite of what is expected, means the expectations of our experience as listeners are all too readily met. In other words, this patchwork-quilt type of composing tends to negate the essence of musical art – that of being a living organism in time, reducing serious music to the equivalent of a kind of highbrow pop-art.

But it works: such is Schnittke's fecundity and inherent creativity that our interest is held. Not everyone will want to go back for seconds, but I would certainly wish to hear this score again if Power were the soloist.

The viola is engaged for about 95-percent of the thirty-two minutes, and Power showed himself to be such a stupendous soloist that I doubt any performance of this work has had could have been superior to this one. He is a superb artist, and I found myself spellbound by his compelling playing – so much so that the audience (many family members of the LSSO personnel, or their fellow-pupils in other subjects) listened absolutely silently throughout, engrossed by the sight and sound of

the music.

After this revelation, Shostakovich's mighty Fifth Symphony formed the concert's second half, a work which enabled Edwards to demonstrate her abilities on a large canvas; now universally accepted as one of the great symphonic utterances of the 20th-century, Shostakovich 5 is an excellent choice for young people.

In many ways, this was a very good performance, certainly in technical terms, for the LSSO had the measure of this masterpiece; ensemble was consistently outstanding and dynamics were also finely judged. But more is required to produce an account that gets to the heart of this great work, and this reading lacked two essential characteristics – finely-judged internal balance and a genuine sense of forward momentum at all times. Edwards's approach produced something in which organic unity was absent, exhibiting at times a lack of the fundamental appreciation of an inherent sense of rhythm. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the opening pages of the Finale, where Shostakovich's finely-detailed long-breathed *accelerando* went for nothing. This Symphony may not appear to be wholly organic, but it is so, yet on this occasion we were given a series of tableaux, all the more surprising from a pupil of Ilya Musin.