

Reviews & Reports

National Youth Orchestra of Scotland Summer Tour

Caird Hall, Dundee, 2. August 2010

The Dundee Courier

04.08.2010

Scottish youth orchestra thrives on complexity

When you have a group of musicians of the talent and calibre of the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland at your disposal, there is no point in feeding them on snippets of classical pops — far better to give them a challenge that will test them.

That was certainly the case on Monday night in the Caird Hall, Dundee, when NYOS — as a prelude to a tour of Ireland — gave a performance that swept aside difficulties posed by the atonal dissonance and rhythmic conundrums of Webern and Berg and the strength-sapping marathon of a Mahler symphony.

This they did with youthful panache and belief in their own abilities, both of which underlie any ensemble under the NYOS umbrella.

Anton Webern's Six Pieces For Orchestra is early 20th century music at its most extreme, swapping the luxury of romanticism for harsh atonal expressionism.

Due to its complicated form, 100% concentration is required and similar commitment is required from the audience if one is to appreciate where the composer is coming from, as snatches of melody are consumed by harsh dissonance.

Works like this deserve their place on the concert repertoire, despite an abrasive nature and steep learning process.

However, it is made easier by mature and competent performances like those of NYOS, whose percussion section deserve plaudits for their efforts.

From roughly the same era but with more lyrical form, four fragments from Wozzeck, Alban Berg's tragic opera, threw more light on the qualities NYOS possesses and introduced a soprano of exquisite class and projection and flair for dramatic intensity.

Jane Irwin brought the heroine Marie to life, demonstrating a huge spectrum of emotions.

Berg's fondness for a sudden diminuendo from full orchestra gave her the chance to exploit them all, with sprechgesang (speech-song) an innovative device of the composer, which added hugely to the overall effect.

It was a marvellous performance, backed by the orchestra who seemed to take great delight in the many of the passages without solo voice.

Any misgivings about these two works were blown away by an explosion of Romantic glory.

Gustav Mahler could be considered on the cusp of the 20th century's musical revolution but to me his Fifth Symphony was the antithesis of what had gone before, with its luxurious harmonies and distinct and engaging melodies.

Although it extends to over an hour, this performance swept by as NYOS delivered a polished display, expertly manipulated by conductor Diego Masson.

Attention should be drawn to the numerous solos that emanated from the orchestra's serried ranks, most notably the French horn who seemed to make the scherzo his very own.

This was a massive undertaking which resulted in an equally huge performance.

Garry Fraser

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National Youth Orchestra of Scotland Summer Tour

National Concert Hall, Dublin, 5. August 2010

The Irish Times

10.08.2010

Irwin, NYOS/Masson

Webern – Six Pieces for Orchestra Op 6

Berg – Three Fragments from Wozzeck.

Mahler – Symphony No 5

Founded in 1979, the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland (NYOS) toured Ireland for the first time last week, bringing to three venues 127 eager instrumentalists, a tough early 20th-century programme, and bags of excitement. Three guest participants represented the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland, the Ulster Youth Orchestra, and the Wiener Jeunesse Orchester.

The NYOS players are aged from 12 to 21, with no shortage of representation at the younger end. Their high standards testified not just to sheer talent, but to solid organisation, inspiring tuition, and the special wisdom of conductor Diego Masson.

Performing with the bite and agility of a much smaller ensemble, the 77 strings combined clarity with grainy and often luminous tone. The woodwinds, equipped with five of each instrument as opposed to the usual two or three, injected uncommon doses of weight and vivid colour, while the pivotal brass solos of Mahler's Symphony No 5 were despatched with unfaltering flair.

Soprano Jane Irwin was a commanding presence in scenes from Berg's Wozzeck, having made her recent switch from the mezzo register without cost to the gravitas familiar to Dublin audiences.

It was in these extracts that Masson drew from his young musicians their most subtly energised and organically expressive playing. In contrast, Webern's intangible and mostly fleeting Six Pieces Op 6 impressed rather on the level of a corporate (and slightly wobbly) tight-rope walk.

With Mahler, however, the orchestra oozed confidence, even when fatigue threatened the tautness of the finale. It was as if Masson had judged precisely how far to subjugate the details to a spirited and invigorating whole.

Andrew Johnstone

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National Youth Orchestra of Scotland Summer Tour

Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow, 9. August 2010

The Herald Scotland

11.08.2010

Tale of two approaches

A curious paradox marked and, for this listener, marred, the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland's performance on Monday night of Mahler's monumental Fifth Symphony.

Conductor Diego Masson allowed the symphony to open with its solo trumpet calls un-conducted. At a few other key points where the focus was on solo instruments he left them to self-steer.

The paradox lay in the fact that, arguably, throughout the vast span of the symphony, other than at these moments, he over-conducted the piece, somewhat regimenting and constraining the flow of the symphony.

Obviously, with a work like this, levels of organisation in performance have to be high. On the plus side, there was great clarity in the string playing in the huge first movement; and, en passant, I loved the rich, deep, grainy sound of the lower NYOS strings.

But the fact that the music was so controlled, perhaps too controlled, stifled the drama of the movement, right to the last thud.

Again, in the second movement, that control restricted the whiplash drive of the music. In the third, it just became too metrical, with little lift in the triple-time music, which felt pedestrian; while the heavenly Adagietto, though beautifully played by the strings, remained earthbound. Only in the coda to the finale did it feel as though Masson let the music off the leash: too little, too late.

The NYOS players, earlier, were stretched a bit in the distilled aphorisms of Webern's concentrated Six Pieces for Orchestra, though their playing was infinitely more confident, idiomatic, and intense in accompanying Jane Irwin's riveting and heartrending singing in the Three Fragments from Alban Berg's opera, Wozzeck.

Michael Tumelty