

National Youth Wind Orchestra of Great Britain

Cond. James Gourley

BBC Proms

Royal Albert Hall

12th August 2012

The National Youth Orchestra (NYWO) is one of the UK's premier youth orchestras, auditioning from amongst our finest young players each year for courses and concerts at Easter and in the summer. Players' ages range from around 15 to 21 and all are in full time education. The last time NYWO was at the Proms was in 2000 so there was much excitement amongst the players - for most this was their first time on the stage at the Royal Albert Hall, with the National Youth Brass Band following them for the second half.

The programme included several British staples for wind or military band, along with a contemporary piece from Martin Ellerby and a newly commissioned work from Gavin Higgins.

The programme opened appropriately with a flourish - in fact, Flourish for Wind by Vaughan Williams. The brass blew away any nerves in their opening fanfare with the full range of wind and percussion soon joining in to create that special wind band sonority, the higher woodwind giving a clear edge on top of the overall sound. This was the first performance of this piece at the Proms despite having been written back in 1939.

Next was Holst's Suite no 2 for Military Band. Holst was keen to impart his music with a sense of 'Britishness' and in this suite, folk songs provide the themes, the first of which was introduced beautifully by the solo euphonium in the March, then picked up by flutes and piccolo and the rest of the band. The Song Without Words pastoral has a yearning feel in a simple melody introduced by clarinet before being passed around and developed by the band, to finish in the hands of solo trumpet, saxophone and then tuba. Here, the band proved that it can be 'sensitive' as well as 'exuberant'! In the brief Song of the Blacksmith, the eight French horn players get their first chance to shine and play 'bell up'. The final 'Fantasia on the Dargason' can be the nemesis of novice wind band players as two tunes are played against one another in different meters. No problems for NYWO as 'Greensleeves' is introduced to the mix by the euphonium. Rousing stuff and it sounds just as fresh as it must have done when it was written over 90 years ago.

'Der Aufstand' (The Riot) by Gavin Higgins was a specially commissioned piece to reflect on the riots of last summer and it featured many foreboding and sinister sounds. The six percussionists got to use many of their more

obscure 'toys' such as a wind machine and the enormous Mahler hammer. Similarly, many of the wind players were called on to use extended techniques such as growling and flutter tonguing whilst the double basses played Bartok pizzicato, slapping the strings on to the fingerboard. This uncompromising piece didn't offer much in respite but really stretched the players - and of course that surely is partly the purpose of an orchestra like this.

In 'Paris Sketches', Ellerby evokes a number of different aspects of the city and this is modern wind band writing at its best. In 'St Germain-des-Près', the full range of brass and woodwind instruments each get the chance to shine, along with tuned percussion, harp and piano. 'Pigalle' somehow calls to mind 'An American in Paris', generally sounding busy with xylophone and frenetic melodies - as well as police sirens and car horns - popping out all over the place. Here, it was clear to see the rapport between conductor James Gourley and his orchestra - there were many smiles and laughs being exchanged as everyone was having a lot of fun. The third movement, Père Lachaise clearly references Satie's music, sometimes introducing harmonies that would have been even a little too left-field for the man who started it all. Nevertheless, this was a dreamy and thoroughly delightful interlude. In its final movement, 'Les Halles' we return back to busy Paris once again and if you closed your eyes, you had to feel someone was being chased, perhaps by Inspector Clouseau?

The final piece of NYWO's concert was Walton's 'Crown Imperial' which has become a regular at royal occasions. This is a very stately march with many instrumental flourishes from the higher woodwind and glockenspiel against a backdrop of a mellifluous brass sound. In the closing bars, the magnificent organ joined the band to ensure a floor-shaking finale. This was a fitting and majestic end to a concert in the same year as the Diamond Jubilee and 2012 London Olympic Games. A packed Albert Hall was shown another way in which our young people are capable of outstanding things and, as noted by Der Aufstand, a great antidote to the depressing scenes of just a year ago.

An excerpt from a Facebook post by conductor James Gourley summed it up for me: "Today, I had to thank God twice (at least) that I do what I do. Let's face it, to play music is wonderful, but to conduct a fine orchestra like the National Youth Wind Orchestra of GB, especially the way they are playing now is something extra. The sounds we are making, the power of more than 80 players, but also the quiet subtlety we are making is amazing Soul Music."

Steve Whiteley

North Cheshire Wind Orchestra

Cond. Catherine Tackley

Royal Northern College of Music

30th June 2012

Shostakovich's popular Festive Overture opened the concert followed by Respighi's Huntingtower (his only work for wind orchestra) paving the way for the highlight of the first half, the world premiere of Gary Carpenter's Runcorn Bridge a NCWO commission. Gary had already whetted our appetites in a pre-concert talk which is a marvellous way to engage an audience in advance of 'who knows what'! Some 10 minutes in duration the work is a perfect length and content for mid range bands looking for something challenging yet not overwhelming in technical difficulty. To quote the composer the work 'begins with a brief, quiet introduction featuring an oboe solo. There follows a lively march at the end of which a reflective interlude (or bridge!) based upon the tune that climaxes the march leads to a lyrical, almost nocturnal section spotlighting the alto saxophone. A variant of the first interlude leads to a scherzo-like section commenced by the euphonium, followed by a 'trio' or middle section that is a Latin-influenced version of the oboe melody first heard in the introduction. A third interlude variant heralds a shimmering return of the nocturnal melody - firstly as a horn solo but subsequently returned to the alto saxophone. Previous melodic materials gradually combine as an extended crescendo leads to a majestic but short coda that in a gesture of symmetrical solidarity refers back to the earlier march/interlude tune.' The band warmed to their very own piece delivering a convincing, well paced and attractive reading of a work that will find many friends in the future.

Adam Gorb (also present) started off the second half with his ubiquitous overture Awayday taking a break for Gordon Jacob's Music for a Festival before returning to end the concert with his fine and entertaining Dances from Crete. Catherine Tackley directed the band with distinction and a moderate, but enthusiastic, audience was present to enjoy the variety of music on offer.

NCWO have a very enterprising commissioning fund which has been running for over ten years and has resulted in numerous new works from a broad range of composers. Anyone interested in joining this admirable scheme can find full details at the band's website www.northcheshire.org.uk

Martin Ellerby