

Review: Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra, Leeds Town Hall, Thursday, September 19, 2019



Jan Latham-Koenig. Image credit: Kris Hellemans

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THE creative friendship of Benjamin Britten and Dmitri Shostakovich during the Cold War “thaw” from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s sent a powerful underlying message: music can bring people together, even when political leaders seek to divide them.

This message of hope is embodied in the ninety gifted young musicians from Russia and the United Kingdom who form the brand new Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra, conducted by Jan Latham-Koenig. Sadly, it must be said that the orchestra’s Leeds Town Hall pit stop on its inaugural Russian and UK tour drew a disappointingly small, but nonetheless warmly responsive audience. A similar programme at a regular Saturday evening concert would pack the Town Hall.

In Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, the richness of string tone, sculpted woodwind solos and burnished horns made as great an impression as the climactic eruption of brass fanfares, bells and canon effects unleashed by conductor Jan Latham-Koenig.

Three years ago in this hall, the brilliant young Siberian born pianist, Pavel Kolesnikov, was the soloist in a volcanic performance of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. On this occasion, he drew a shimmering rainbow spectrum of colours from Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a theme by Paganini. Kolesnikov's mercurial passage work was cushioned, in the fast variations, by the orchestra's gossamer-like string playing.

In marked contrast, the Four Sea Interludes from Britten's opera Peter Grimes became, in the concert hall, a set of atmospheric mini-tone poems with muted colours and shafts of blazing light. The orchestra's performance was glowingly shaped by Jan Latham-Koenig whose build-up of the angry Storm Interlude inexorably tumbled into its violent conclusion.

A Shostakovich novelty ended the official programme in lighter vein. His engaging 1950s Suite for Variety Stage Orchestra deploys a large orchestra including saxophones, accordion, glockenspiel and xylophone. The music is upbeat, racy and occasionally manic with an ironic twist to the well known "Viennese" Waltz which is in the dark key of C minor. The four movements were played with tremendous elan and obvious enjoyment. Enthusiastic audience applause earned a dramatic encore: Montagues and Capulets, from Prokofiev's ballet Romeo and Juliet.

by Geoffrey Mogridge