

## Anglo-Russian musical collaboration: the Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra makes its London debut at the end of its inaugural tour of Russia and the UK

Labels: [Cadogan Hall](#), [concert review](#)



Shostakovich: *Hamlet* - Jan Latham-Koenig, Edward Fox, Freddie Fox, Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra  
Cadogan Hall (Photo Luke Toddrey)

Ralph Vaughan Williams, Sergei Rachmaninov, Benjamin Britten, Dmitri Shostakovich; Pavel Kolesnikov, Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra, Jan Latham-Koenig, Edward Fox, Freddie Fox; Cadogan Hall

Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 26 September 2019

### **The end of the BSFO's inaugural tour culminating in a dramatic new version of Shostakovich's music for *Hamlet***

The [Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra](#), conductor [Jan Latham-Koenig](#), concluded its inaugural tour of Russia and the United Kingdom with a concert at [Cadogan Hall](#) on 25 September 2019, attended by HRH Prince Michael of Kent (one of the patrons of the orchestra) and a number of Russian and British dignitaries. The programme mixed British and Russian music, with a first half consisting of RVW's *Tallis Fantasia* and Sergei Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with London-based Russian pianist [Pavel Kolesnikov](#) and in the second half Benjamin Britten's *Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes* and Dmitri Shostakovich's *Hamlet Suite, Op. 106*, music taken from his incidental music for the film *Hamlet* in a new version by Jan Latham-Koenig for two actors and orchestra, in which the orchestra was joined by [Edward Fox](#) and [Freddie Fox](#).

RVW's *Tallis Fantasia* was written in 1910, re-working a hymn tune by Thomas Tallis into a complex fantasy for three ensembles, a large string orchestra, a small group and a solo quartet. Sergei Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* dates from 24 years later, written for the composer himself to perform and a piano concerto in all but name, a sequence of variations on the famous theme. Neither work could be considered as particularly advanced, both ignore the Viennese developments in music, but Rachmaninov's work on the surface seems particularly conservative in style. Both composers, however, have a great deal to say in their own idiom and are surprisingly innovative. That said, I have to confess that the pairing of the two works seemed rather conceptual, and frankly despite a pair of superb performances neither piece seemed to say anything to the other.



Rachmaninov: *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* - Pavel Kolesnikov, Jan Latham-Koenig, Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra - Cadogan Hall (Photo Luke Toddrey)

But it was the orchestra that we were there to hear, 87 young players from British and Russian conservatoires, not quite a 50/50 split and different sections had different make-up (the violins were largely Russian, and predominantly women for instance). The group first met a month ago in Russia, and its first concert was on 9 September 2019 in Sochi. Jan Latham-Koenig has been responsible for welding the young players into an ensemble, and has done so admirably. See [my interview](#) with Jan Latham-Koenig for background on the orchestra's aims and how it came to be founded.

In the RVW we could admire the focus, vibrancy and full body of the string tone, the players bringing a lovely sweep and unanimity to the phrases. The smaller orchestra was up on the balcony behind the main group, and we had a fine sense of interaction between the three groups with some superb playing from the solo quartet. Latham-Koenig takes quite an active view of the music, this is not pastoral RVW but something more complex and interesting reflecting, perhaps, Latham-Koenig's European view (English-born and trained, he has French, Danish, Polish as well as Mauritian antecedents and is currently based on Moscow).

With its catchy melodies and big tunes, Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* can sometimes seem a bit of a *jeu d'esprit* (and I have to confess that my view of the work is eternally coloured by [Frederick Ashton's 1980 ballet](#) based on the music). But Latham-Koenig and soloist Pavel Kolesnikov ([whom we last saw](#) in the 1879 version of Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, see [my review](#)) took a vibrant and rather strong view of the piece, by turns powerful and skittish. Latham-Koenig encouraged the orchestra to bring out crisp rhythms and highly dynamic playing, whilst he gave us vividly vigorous moments, Kolesnikov's playing had a delicacy to it as well, sometimes spinning a lovely web of sound, and in the 'big tune' giving us the sort of classical restraint that Rachmaninov had in his own pianism. There was a great build up to the *Dies Irae* and then a throw-away ending.



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Pavel Kolesnikov rewarded our enthusiasm with an encore, a devastating account of Chopin's *'Raindrop' Prelude*.

Part two of the concert opened with a little confusion in the audience. Prince Michael of Kent's speech had mentioned on the Shostakovich in the second half, and the performance began not with Britten but with Edward Fox declaiming. But declaiming what, certainly not Shakespeare, it was a speech about the sea and things finally twigged. Given the presence of two distinguished actors, Latham-Koenig had interleaved Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* with passages from Crabbe's poem *The Borough*, which originally inspired Britten. It was fascinating to hear the descriptions of Grimes, the Borough contrasting with Britten's evocations of such.





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The players brought superb focus to their tone, and vibrancy too, and the Britten was full of strong, tight rhythms and vivid colours. Latham-Koenig took a highly active view of this music, intense, very dynamic and rather driven. This was a highly dramatic not to say incisive view of the music, and made you intrigued to hear Latham-Koenig's account of the full opera (which he has conducted, he gave the Chilean premiere of the work), and the final interlude reached a powerful and intense climax.

Britten's *Peter Grimes* was written in 1945, whilst Shostakovich's music for *Hamlet* was originally written for Grigor Kozintsev and Iosif Shapiro's 1964 film of *Hamlet* based on Boris Pasternak's Russian translation of Shakespeare. The film evidently takes quite a dramatic view of the subject, and Shostakovich's score is full of movements which bring an almost symphonic sweep to the piece. Latham-Koenig had

created quite a satisfying music-dramatic structure with Freddie Fox as Prince Hamlet, and Edward Fox popping up as Claudius, Polonius, Horatio, the Grave-Digger, the Ghost of King Hamlet and others. Edward Fox has in fact played the title role in Shakespeare's play, and though Freddie Fox has done a number of Shakespearean roles, I do not think he has yet played the Prince of Denmark. But his performance intrigued enough to make me interested to see the full article. Edward Fox proved adept at slipping into different characters, bringing out each speech.

Perhaps the most striking thing was the use of melodrama, so that the 'To be or not to be' speech was accompanied by Shostakovich's music in a way which quite determined how Freddie Fox might declaim it, the result was highly satisfying but I can imagine an actor would not want to always work like that. Similarly, the Ghost scene, the Grave diggers scene and the funeral of Ophelia were similarly done. The result was a striking and vibrantly emotive view of the play, and a way of putting Shostakovich's superb music into context and rather makes me want to see the film [it is available on [DVD from Amazon](#)]. The final orchestral movement, very similar in material to the opening, brought things to a superb close with a vivid account of Shostakovich at his symphonic best.

There were encores, the orchestra expanded somewhat (a cor anglais, a double bassoon, a saxophone) to give us the grave scene from Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, with Freddie Fox declaiming Romeo's final speech, and then gave the 'Waltz' from Shostakovich's *Suite for Variety Stage Orchestra* (compiled from his various film and stage scores of the 1950s).



Rostropovich, Oistrakh, Britten and Shostakovich during the festival of British music in Moscow. March 1963  
(Photo © 2009 Irina Antonovna Shostakovich)

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