



# Anglo-Russian repertoire as the Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra closes its first tour

By Mark Pullinger, 26 September 2019

Although political relations between Britain and Russia can still be chilly, The Cold War is long past. Even during that deepest frost, musicians reached out across the divide. One of the most significant composer friendships was between Benjamin Britten and Dmitri Shostakovich, inspiration for a new Anglo-Russian orchestra which bears their names. Britten visited Shostakovich in Moscow six times, while the Russian finally made it to Aldeburgh in 1972, when Britten shared with him work in progress, his final opera, *Death in Venice*. They conversed in a kind of broken German they called “Aldeburgh Deutsch”. Music was their common language.



Jan Latham-Koenig

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It's sad that Aldeburgh wasn't on the itinerary of the Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra's first tour. Its 87 young musicians, drawn from conservatoires of the two countries, first collaborated just four weeks ago. It performed concerts in Sochi, Moscow and St Petersburg before heading for a number of UK concerts, of which this Cadogan Hall date formed the final leg. The founding artistic director [who drove its creation](#) is conductor [Jan Latham-Koenig](#) who naturally paired Britten and Shostakovich after the interval, but opened with a less obvious coupling.

I don't know if Ralph Vaughan Williams and Sergei Rachmaninov ever met, although Rachmaninov certainly attended the premiere of RVW's *Serenade to Music* in 1938 – he had played his own Second Piano Concerto in the first half – and was so moved to tears that he had to leave his seat in the Royal Albert Hall and listen privately. No *Serenade to Music* here, but Vaughan Williams' equally beautiful *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* to really stretch those Anglo-Russian strings. Or Russian strings, for the vast majority of the BSFO strings – apart from an all-British double bass section – hail from Russian conservatoires. This perhaps accounted for

some unidiomatic solo phrasing, but the overall sound was richly upholstered under the willowy Latham-Koenig's languid beat. Using the balcony above the stage for the smaller ensemble worked well, a haunting ghostly echo.



Edward Fox and the Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra

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Rachmaninov was represented by his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, performed with a good deal of poetry by young Russian, [Pavel Kolesnikov](#), shaping the slow variations sensitively. There was piano sparkle in the livelier variations, although co-ordination with the orchestra was not always perfectly aligned, with some clumsy *col legno* strings in Variation 9. I was less impressed by the BSFO woodwinds and brass, particularly some sour intonation in Variation 17, but the devilish aspects of the closing variations came off well. Kolesnikov provided an ironic commentary on the capital's recent weather with a "Raindrop" Prelude encore that dripped long and slow.

It was the Storm from Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes* where things really took off. Dawn had featured some piquant wind playing, but in Moonlight, the sea had lumbered and the percussion playing was far too tentative. But everyone let rip in a terrific Storm that had the audience battenning down the hatches. The Britten was not served well by readings from George Crabbe's *The Borough* – inspiration for the opera – especially in Edward Fox's plummy tones. He and his son Freddie Fox were far more effective in music from Shostakovich's film score to *Hamlet*, particularly because the music was designed to have dialogue spoken over it. From the opening whip cracks, brooding Elsinore loomed large. The ghostly appearance of Hamlet's father chilled, but Shostakovich's deadpan humour surfaced in the Gravedigger's scene.

These are early days for the Britten-Shostakovich Festival Orchestra but the first signs are more than encouraging.

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