



[Bluebeard's Castle](#)

Winter Concert Tour by National Youth Orchestra

at The Bridgewater Hall, Manchester

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) January 2018

2018 has started extremely well with my first review of the year, and the National Youth Orchestra's first concert of the year.

I have to be honest though, that when the idea of my reviewing this concert was first mooted I very nearly said no. I am no huge fan of opera at the best of times, and the idea of a concert opera written as a duologue between the two protagonists, with no peripheral visual stimulæ, and no discernable harmonic and melodic arias and choruses did nothing to whet my appetite. However, I am always open to new experiences, and being a sterling advocate and supporter of

all things youth, I decided I should attend.

I am extremely glad I did. On occasions throughout the evening I closed my eyes and concentrated solely on the music. What I heard was not the tentative, insecurities of students learning their craft, but instead I heard full, bold, confident and mature sounds from musicians who not only knew their own instruments but knew also how to play in a group and to blend and listen to other players. It was a group of musicians who knew how to be conducted and further, it also struck me that these musicians also knew intellectually and felt emotionally the music they were playing. This was a large concert orchestra (including 4 harpists and an organist!) and all the players were aged between 16 and 18!

Before the show-piece of this mini-opera however, the orchestra treated us to two shorter pieces, perhaps classified as 'tone poems'. First was a piece that I had always thought of as being monotonous and boring; Liadov's 'The Enchanted Lake'. A slow, quiet, and unchanging eerie, almost ethereal piece of music. I still think it is boring, but the NYO under guest conductor and Music Director of The Halle Orchestra, Sir Mark Elder it was brought nicely to life, using the minimalist dynamics to good effect in this practically acoustically perfect auditorium, the Bridgewater Hall.

The second piece before the interval was a piece of music that all fans of Disney will instantly recognise. However, this evening our imaginations had to spin the story rather than watching the excellent cartoon. French composer Paul Dukas' fantastic 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice'. Here the orchestra were brilliantly together and in the faster and more furious passages their timing was immaculate. I do think however that Elder was somewhat over-indulgent with the pauses in the denouement, but that is just a personal preference perhaps.

And so to the title piece of the concert, and the opera I was dreading. This is Bela Bartok's version of an old European folk tale, Duke Bluebeard's Castle. The story, at least in this version is very simple. Bluebeard takes a new and young bride and takes her back to his isolated castle. She starts to become concerned when she reaches the castle as it is lifeless and cold; moreover there are 7 locked and bolted doors around the castle courtyard which remain locked and Bluebeard refuses to open for her. She eventually persuades him to let her have the keys and she one by one opens the doors to find the various horrors that lie behind them. An Armoury with weapons covered in blood, a torture chamber with blood-stained walls, and so on and so forth until the fifth door which is his balcony overlooking his dukedom, and the whole countryside is bright and bathed in light. Bluebeard then asks her not to open the next two doors but to kiss him and all will be well. She tells him that without knowing what is behind the final two doors, happiness can never be theirs. The penultimate door opens up onto a large subterranean lake, full, he tells her, of his tears. It is spooky and cold, and sadness looms in the air. Finally, she opens the final door, realising what lies behind her and understanding her fate. behind the final door live all the 'dead' past wives of Bluebeard, and it is her fate, since she needed to know the answers to all 7 doors, to go with the other wives and as the door closes behind her, and Bluebeard weeps at his folly, the orchestra return to play the same theme as opens the opera indicating that the whole cycle will start again.

The spoken optional introduction to the opera was this evening read by four members of the National Youth Theatre who quite cleverly became the former wives of Bluebeard at the end, whilst Duke Bluebeard himself was sung by the absolutely electrifying Robert Haywood. Despite having no costume or set, the intensity of his acting was quite unnerving, and his vocal prowess second to none. I truly enjoyed his performed. And as a last minute stand-in due to illness, the role of Judith, Bluebeard's bride was sung this evening by Rinat Shaham. Again, a complete and consummate performance and vocally stunning.

Musically very emotive and although I still don't like the opera, this evening has made me appreciate it and understand it. It is a very clever and intelligent piece of writing, and I did like the way the music sometimes complimented the singer and other times worked in opposition depending on which of the two singers' opinions Bartok seemed to be agreeing with. I feel now that I have listened to the definitive version of this short opera, and am grateful and thankful to

the NYO and conductor Mark Elder for providing me with what is my definitive version of it, and have no interest in ever hearing the work again.

For the opera, a large LED cable of light was placed around the orchestra and this was lit throughout with different colours depending on mood and what lay beyond the doors. Each time bathing the orchestra in ghostly shadows of whatever colour was displayed. Red for the blood, cold white or steel blue for despair and emptiness, and gold-yellow for the joys of looking out over the expanse of his dukedom. It was a very lovely idea, and created a nice effect. Tiny white fairy lights were also switched on over every music stand to create the lake of tears. Moreover, in an effort to try and give the sense that perhaps the orchestra itself is the castle - an idea that has been toyed with ever since its first performance - those members of the orchestra who were not playing at any one time were given simple movement and direction to exemplify the narrative such as covering their faces with their hands, creating wind effects, or looking with marvel at their 'treasure' (their instruments). All these ideas were good and certainly helped to create the correct mood. Sadly though, from where I was sitting in the front stalls, these effects were practically lost on me. For maximum enjoyment and understanding, one needed to be seeing these from above, and those seated in the circle would undoubtedly have had a much better perspective of the effects created.

The one thing that didn't really work quite so well however was the large screen at the back of the orchestra which posted the English translation of the Hungarian sung in the opera. It was very Curate's Eggish. Sometimes we would be given a standard English translation, whilst other times it reverted to old and archaic English, and we were even 'treated' to poetic English too every now and then. It was stylistically and semantically mismatched and confusing. However, that is a small thing overall.

Otherwise, I found myself enthralled and amazed by the undeniable talent on display this evening, and if ever I have the opportunity of attending another NYO concert, I shall do so

eagerly.