The Halle Orchestra with RNCM students

at RNCM

Reviewed by Matthew Dougall January 2018

'*An Orchestral Concert to conclude the RNCM's String Festival*' is a rather convoluted title, but quite a simple premise. A reduced size Halle Orchestra most graciously joined forces with students from the RNCM this evening to provide support, an invaluable opportunity and learning experience for those chosen few students to be able to play alongside one of the most renowned orchestras in the world. The string section of the orchestra therefore was half Halle and half RNCM students.

This orchestral concert also marked the end of a short Strings Festival hosted by the RNCM, and so the three pieces played in this evening's concert heavily featured the string sections. The concert was a very English one, with music from three of this country's foremost Late Romantic / 20th Century composers.

First came music from the pen of Oldham-born Sir William Walton. Most people will remember Walton for his stirring cinematic and patriotic music, but his output was far more varied as with tonight's offering, his seldom played Viola Concerto, which is a work of singular beauty.

I have to my certain knowledge only ever heard recordings of this piece before, and never seen it live, and oh, how much more thrilling and interesting it is to actually watch and understand which instrument makes which sound and how they blend together.

In this evening's performance the orchestra was conducted by the RNCM's Junior Fellow in Conducting, **Sergej Bolkhovets**. I have seen Bolkhovets a few times now and really admire his style and control, and he is lovely to watch too, as he immerses himself in the music he is playing but never letting it overtake him, keeping a firm and masterful grip on the players in front of him.

The viola soloist today was German **Veit Hertenstein**. Still quite young but with an excellent pedigree and beautiful touch to his viola; Hertenstein is Viola Professor at both the RNCM and the Musikhochschule in Detmold, and a member of The Orion String Quartet.

After this quasi-Romantic and melodic piece of writing, we went back only a little in time to 1905 for Elgar and his Introduction and Allegro, written for the strings alone, augmented by string

quartet who seem somehow to compete with the orchestra's strings. It is a hugely ambitious and difficult piece of writing for such a grouping, so who better to conduct this work than England's foremost exponent of Elgar, The Halle Orchestra's Music Director, **Sir Mark Elder**.

The strings sounded lush as Elder pushed the dynamics of this piece to their maximum, obviously enjoying himself and loving the music, enthusing every player with the same passion that he shares for this piece, and this paid dividend. I don't think I have ever heard it played better.

The piece after the interval however was the showpiece of the concert and they certainly seemed to have left the best until last. It was the only piece of the three of which I previously knew nothing and had never heard before, and it was indeed a real treat of a piece and one that I will undoubtedly be adding to my CD collection.

It was Benjamin Britten's Violin Concerto. A work of outstanding genius and perhaps the only work of Britten that I have sat through fully engaged in and enjoyed enough to want to own a copy. In Elder's own introduction to the work just before conducting it, he too spoke passionately and knowledgeably considering this piece to be Britten's greatest work. The work itself is undeniably heavily influenced by Spain and the Spanish, but Elder went further, saying that but for the Spanish Civil War, this work would never have been written. It is in three movements, each one given over to an element of Spanishness. The first movement is the pride of Spain, and tells us what it means to be a Spaniard, whilst the second movement demonises Spanish dance forms before the serenity and sense of loss that comes from the plaintive third movement, which reflects with passion and horror the losses and the devastation caused by Spain's civil war.

Giving the music an impassioned and highly energised violin solo was renowned soloist **Alexander Sitkovetsky**
. To say his performance was electric would be an understatement and as he jumped high in the air with his energetic plucking he managed to bring every tiny nuance from this highly emotive piece of writing.

What a fantastic concert, and so wonderful and inspirational to see and hear such a magical collaboration between two of the world's greatest institutions, the Halle Orchestra and the Royal Northern College Of Music.