

Telegraph

Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Usher Hall, Edinburgh, review

Peter Oundjian faced quite a challenge as the new Royal Scottish National Orchestra's Musical Director at this concert in Usher Hall on Friday, writes Ivan Hewett.

October 8, 2012

It's a splendid ringing moniker the Royal Scottish National Orchestra possesses, which suggests it has an automatic title to the top place in Scotland's orchestral rankings. Up here in Edinburgh it doesn't seem so obvious. The Scottish Chamber Orchestra is now resurgent under its brilliant young conductor Robin Ticciati. The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra offers Wagner with top-drawer casts and a contemporary music programme that's as bold as any in the country.

Pinioned between these two, it's hard for the RSNO to carve out a role. French music is the focus under its flamboyant and gifted Musical Director Stéphane Denève. He's a challenge for new director Peter Oundjian, who made his debut on Friday.

Flamboyant Oundjian certainly isn't, but there's an energy and a model of technical correctness. He leads with the air of a superbly confident conductor, doing one standing on his head.

As for the programme, it's a mix of light and dark, popular and "difficult", with an emphasis on Russian music. Tchaikovsky's Russian and Ludmilla overture was the first, followed by Shostakovich's 11th Symphony. This musical piece, which was first performed in front of the Tsar's Winter Palace in 1905 has the foreboding that opens it – like a portrayal of a Russian steppe and again and again, and the final catastrophe is a long time coming.

It's a concentration of the players and Oundjian's shrewd pacing that the tension in this slow movement unfolds. And how well the woodwind soloists captured the music's air of dogged fatalism. It was a feature I began to share, as the repetitions ground on, and the ending seemed no closer.

It was the simple brio and joy of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto that was the evening's highlight for me. Soloist Vadim Gluzman's sensational performance galvanised everyone around him. His gypsy ease and louche way of pausing before each return of the theme in the Finale gave a delight, which for me went deeper than all Shostakovich's ponderous literalism.

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