

Review

Ulster Youth Orchestra

Friday August 19 2011

The Guildhall, Londonderry

Ruth McCartney

The first of this year's Ulster Youth Orchestra summer concerts featured music by three very popular Russian composers. Conducted by Scottish-born Garry Walker, who has experience with all the BBC orchestras and more, Friday night's concert, in the Guildhall in Londonderry, began with the suitably vivacious *Festive Overture* by Shostakovich. Right from the start this overture demonstrated the incredible strength of each section of this year's young orchestra. The strong brass opening, followed by the racing string theme and bubbly clarinet solo, backed up at every turn by the sparkling percussion department, gave the audience a rousing opener. The cheers from the audience at the end of this piece set the tone for the rest of the evening which oozed excellence at every turn.

Michael McHale was the soloist in *Piano Concerto No 2* by Rachmaninov. This emotionally charged, romantic masterpiece was given a virtuosic performance by this Northern Ireland born pianist and former Methody student. His brilliant technique was demonstrated in the faster passages while the slower sections were simply sublime and obviously heartfelt. It is such a great experience for these young players to play with an artist of this calibre. McHale's world-class performance moved me to tears. The conductor had a great rapport with the players who were incredibly sensitive and responsive to the soloist.

Rimsky Korsakov's famous *Scheherazade* was a substantial piece for the UYO to tackle in the second part of the concert. The beguiling voice of the solo violin guided the audience through storybook tales from Arabian Nights, the orchestra's dramatic colours depicting perfumed gardens, bustling bazaars and an unforgettable shipwreck at sea. Tara McNeill was a superb leader and suitably bewitching soloist. The UYO excelled in this real tour-de-force, playing with precision and style. This is real talent, real X factor in my book and the standing ovation at the end said it all.

The concert was repeated in the Ulster Hall on Saturday night.