

Review: Music

Monday 4 August 2014

NYOS 35th Anniversary Gala

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Usher Hall, Edinburgh

Michael Tumelty

IF there was such a species, I would award four and a half stars to the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland's performance of Richard Strauss's Alpine Symphony on Saturday, with the half point deducted from conductor Michael Francis for running at a hill.

Climbing doesn't work like that, neither in musical depiction nor in life (don't laugh: 45 years ago this codger could do a few mountains and glaciers). Francis rushed the symphony into its assault on the mountain, sent the music pelting up to the summit, made the mighty storm a rather noisy squall, and brought down dusk with an unseemly haste.

The Alpine Symphony needs time and, above all, space to unfold its vast vista. This was hustled: "Quick; let's get up there and back before the weather turns."

That's the downside. On the other hand, Francis, with the youngsters of NYOS in fantastically detailed and texturally lucid form, took the great symphony far beyond its obvious pictorial representation into an abstract realm which revealed the extent and depth of thematic integration that welds the huge structure into a coherent entity. And that was a very important achievement by these fabulous young players. The Alpine Symphony is 99 years old. Let's send it into its second century with a fresh, abstract, not pictorially-dependent appreciation of its symphonic homogeneity.

Otherwise, this splendid birthday gala crackled with clarity throughout Hakan Hardenberger's blistering performance of Sally Beamish's Trumpet Concerto and the NYOS youngsters' effervescent, sparkling account of their Walton party piece, the Johannesburg Festival Overture, rounding off a pretty triumphant summer season for all three of the NYOS classical orchestras.