



Sense of loss as the band strikes up

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Ivan Hewett reviews the Minnesota Orchestra at the Albert Hall

As the Proms enters its last few weeks the starry visiting orchestras are making their appearance. One American orchestra has already been kept away by increased flight security, but fortunately the Minnesota Orchestra made it.

It's not counted among the "big six" American orchestras, but on the evidence of this concert they are a great virtuoso band. And like their more famous rivals the orchestra can boast several characterful soloists, including the splendid first trumpet, and a bassoonist who made a wonderful creamy Frenchified sound in Beethoven's C minor Piano Concerto.

advertisement This piece was a late substitute for Osvaldo Golijov's Three Songs, which could not be performed owing to soprano Dawn Upshaw's indisposition.

Never having been a fan of Golijov's ersatz spirituality this loss didn't cause me much sorrow, and I was looking forward to hearing both the Beethoven and the much-talked-of young soloist Liyr Williams.

It turned out to be a curiously mixed experience. Williams certainly has a delicate touch, and he brought out the inward, proto-romantic elements in the concerto in a beautiful and striking way. But this piece has an assertive public side too, which never really registered.

The brusque and bold harmonic leaps towards the end weren't given any rhetorical weight, which meant the magical turn to nostalgia immediately afterwards was robbed of much of its force.

The evening's big piece was Mahler's big-boned, radiantly good-humoured 5th Symphony.

The conductor Osmo Vänslä clearly had plenty of ideas about this piece. Sometimes they were brilliant, like the wonderful way he prolonged the magical moment of ambiguity between the end of the Adagietto and the Finale.

And at the very beginning Vänslä coaxed a bleached-out pianissimo which was a very striking way to perform a funeral march, as if feeling were numbed by sorrow. But when the same pianissimo recurred in the famous Adagietto it seemed inappropriate, stifling the music's natural expressivity.

And in general the larger line of the music was often lost in the accumulation of striking details. The journey had plenty of fascinating twists and turns, but at the end there wasn't much sense of arrival.

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