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Prom 54: Minnesota Orchestra/Vanska, Royal Albert Hall, London ★★★★★

By Edward Seckerson

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The Minnesota Orchestra lost a soprano but gained a pianist on their way to the Proms. The trendy ethnicity of Osvaldo Golijov songs (which the indisposed Dawn Upshaw was to have sung) now shifted to patrician Beethoven and a less intriguing route to Mahler's Fifth than might have been provided by the Argentina-born Golijov's Russian-Romanian-Jewish ancestry.

The orchestra's own ancestry was soon established in Barber's First Essay for Orchestra. This sonorous lamentation showed off the orchestra's warmth and homogeneity. The trumpet-led acclamations from the euphonious brass choir felt as if they came from somewhere and meant something. And that level of sensitivity was carried through to Beethoven's C minor Piano Concerto No 3, in which the gifted young Welshman Llyr Williams exhibited a poise, not to say self-effacement, rare among today's keyboard virtuosi.

The "correctness" of the performance was a little anonymous in the first movement. The stiffness of Williams' unsmiling bow to the audience seemed to define his playing: it felt constricted. But then came the cadenza, a bridge between Mozartian simplicity and Beethovenian knowingness. The slow movement was lofty, temperament at last glimpsed in the subtle but telling pauses for thought that Williams opened up between notes. The conductor Osmo Vanska was a most sympathetic collaborator.

Vanska's Mahler, though, felt all wrong. It was partly the sound: too blended, too refined. Mahler's personality resides in the extremes of sonority, the pungency and rough-hewn elementalism of the writing. Even with bells raised, the winds lacked stridency and attitude. Too much beauty, not enough beast. And Vanska does so love to take in the scenery. For all the flexibility of his approach to Mahler's tempo rubato, the overriding impression was one of impossible slowness. Beautiful though the Adagietto was, it felt as if Mahler's love letter to Alma had somehow got lost in the post.

BBC Proms to 9 September (020-7589 8212; www.bbc.co.uk/proms)

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