

Masters of ferocious demands

Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra Adrian Boult Hall

The awful truth about Berlioz is that not everything he wrote is as inspired as he tended to think. His *King Lear* overture, with which Neil Aston and the Birmingham Philharmonic opened Sunday's concert, is typically eccentric. To bring it to the boil, it needs a performance of the most flamboyant extremes. But if Aston and the BPO didn't quite achieve this, it was hard to feel - as the violins wrestled bravely with Berlioz' intractable writing - that it was wholly their fault.

And the two genuine masterpieces with which they followed it confirmed this suspicion. Stravinsky's poker-game ballet *Jeu de cartes* is as difficult as it is witty. From the opening fanfare, the BPO players showed themselves masters of its ferocious technical demands, and equally important, its bar-by-bar shifts of mood and colour. Aston's unshakable beat gave his reading real dramatic purpose, and his players the assurance they needed to realize all the humour of this kaleidoscopic score. The BPO's woodwinds, in particular, shone both as wonderfully characterful soloists and as a buoyant, truly balletic ensemble at the centre of the drama.

After that, Aston and the BPO might have been excused for treating Dvorák's *New World* symphony as relaxation. Instead, Aston, conducting from memory, shaped a performance that powerfully asserted this familiar work's stature as a symphony, rather than just a string of good tunes. Shunning superficial effects, he shaped the outer movements in long, arching paragraphs, climaxes rising naturally from the musical argument. Yet there was still room for poetry in the famous Largo. Ann Hagyard's luscious-toned cor anglais solo was supported by such lovingly-phrased string playing that it was like hearing this most-abused of movements for the first time.

Richard Bratby