

Powerful horns carry the day

Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra

Adrian Boult Hall

One of the many assets of the excellent Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra is its remarkable horn section, surely the envy even of several professional ensembles across the country, and Sunday's programme of works by the two Nordic greats certainly played to its strengths.

Nielsen's *Helios* Overture opened the evening, a work which loses its way after a splendid horn-based beginning (shades of the contemporary Debussy *La Mer* and Wagner's *Rheingold*, probably encountered by violinist Nielsen in the

orchestra pit). For all conductor Michael Lloyd's judicious building through dynamic development, this remained an uneasy reading, cellos thin in their upper reaches and strings generally struggling in the hectic *fugato*.

But what a difference a masterpiece makes, with divided violas and cellos so much more confident in the demands of Sibelius' terse but rewarding Seventh Symphony. A wonderfully compact string response to Lloyd's masterly shaping of transitions made the score's elemental stirrings all the more telling, pastel woodwind were delicate and evocative, and the important trombone solos were impressively delivered by Les Whitehouse.

More trombone presence came with Nielsen's Flute Concerto, Matthew Doubleday cheekily trying to undermine soloist Caroline Williams – disruption was one of Nielsen's obsessions. This was a very special account from Williams, flitting in and out of the music's various quirks, her tones often appealingly seductive, her technique deft in the flickering cadenza.

Finally back to the BPO's magnificent horns, noble, bell-like in Sibelius' Fifth Symphony. Lloyd's transitions were again masterly, but a couple of disappointments came in the finale: no rasping double-bass bow-bouncing, and inaccurate delivery of the two concluding hammer-blows.

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