

Passion in the heat of the night

Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra

Adrian Boult Hall

On the hottest night of the year Birmingham Philharmonic and guest conductor Michael Seal must have longed for something less torrid.

True, Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No 1 may not be as draining as some of his symphonies, although its technical difficulties for soloist and orchestra are sweaty enough, but Rachmaninov's Symphony No. 2 in E minor is a real hotbed of passion.

Despite requiring more lustrous and fatter sounding strings, conductor and orchestra gave a remarkably focused and sustained reading of this wonderful work.

What made it so satisfying was Seal's control of structure and texture – individual phrases, paragraphs, and instrumental balance – so that the music unfolded clearly, in an expansive though never sprawling way.

As romantic symphonies go, and Rachmaninov went all the way in this one, there are some wonderful moments, especially the first and third movements.

Seal's handling of these pivotal sections drew from the BPO the richest and loveliest playing of the evening.

In the Shostakovich concerto (it followed an exciting and subtly militaristic account of his ebullient *Festival Overture*) Byron Parish maintained the long lines of the deceptively modest-sounding

opening with a tonal purity and elegance that the BPO players occasionally found difficult to match. They seemed much happier in the grotesqueries of the Scherzo, which Parish contributed to as a *concertato*, rather than upfront soloist.

Parish's slight reluctance to dominate the musical fabric of this bitter-sweet piece certainly aided textural clarity, notably in the *Pas-sacaglia*, and his treatment of the cadenza was spot-on, bursting into glorious life after much initial questioning.

The concluding *Burlesque*, tightly managed by Seal (plaudits for woodwind and brass departments) was played by Parish with, again, understated but undeniably virtuosic brilliance.

David Hart