

Evening of Arnold was just the right ticket

Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra

Adrian Boult Hall

In celebrating their patron Malcolm Arnold's 85th birthday with a concert devoted to his music, the splendid Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra brought some revealing insights and some of the most eloquent melodies ever conceived.

The first of these came right at the beginning, Arnold's *Peterloo Overture* opening with generously-phrased noble outpourings portraying the aspirations of 8,000 people gathered together in the cause of political reform.

Then the authorities deliberately crush the peaceful demonstration (has nothing changed since the 1819 of this massacre?), the orchestra weighing in with fearsome batterings strong on decibels but well balanced under Michael Lloyd's meticulously prepared direction.

Reminders came here of the similar context of Shostakovich's

Eleventh Symphony and of the implacable side-drum of Nielsen's Fifth. This brought an awareness of how much orchestral music Arnold has assimilated, both during his time as principal trumpeter of the London Philharmonic Orchestra and for many years after, his ear constantly alert to new stimuli.

Elsewhere in the evening we heard influences of Sibelius, Berlioz, Dukas, Mussorgsky, even Charles Ives, and others, but to suggest plagiarism could not be further from the truth. This is a composer who has coined a vibrantly communicative language rooted in deeply musical sources, and whose technique is unobtrusively awesome.

There were well-loved inclusions (*Four Cornish Dances*, *River Kwai March*, *Tam O'Shanter*), a brilliant rarity, Arnold's early overture *The Smoke*, depicting a sinister London of 1948, and finally the magnificent Fifth Symphony, both visionary and lamenting, its last glorious outburst given to Arnold's beloved trumpets.

Christopher Morley