

# Reviews

## The bottle to offer up a dream menu

Birmingham Philharmonic  
Orchestra

Adrian Boult Hall

★★★★

Though it may be amateur in status, the Birmingham Philharmonic is an orchestra of remarkable professional aspirations, with the vision and self-confidence to deliver an amazing programme of hefty 20th-century masterpieces such as we heard on Sunday – though I doubt many professional organisations would have the bottle to offer such a dream menu.

All three of the evening's main works were written within eight years of each other, with the most recent, Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs*, sounding the most spectacularly conservative.

But who cares? This is a work of sublime nostalgia and resignation, and the soloist here, Amanda Winfield, tackling this benchmark piece for the first time, showed herself profoundly attuned to the texts and vocally capable of soaring above the dark colours of the eloquent scoring.

Such was the triumph of this performance (Michael Lloyd's accompanying baton ever-alert and encouraging, leader Byron Parish's violin solos sweetly complementary) that there was a sense that Brunnhilde's Immolation Scene from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* might rise over the horizon.

Rachmaninov's *Vocalise* was given almost as an encore, and how good it was to hear it in its original, rubato-inviting version for wordless voice.

Greater Rachmaninov came with the *Symphonic Dances*, properly gritty and macabre in performance, every section of the BPO, lamenting saxophone included, on its mettle. Interweaving orchestral lines were subtly shaped by Lloyd, capped by horns roaring and brass firmly commanding. And how clever of Lloyd to let the tam-tam resound at the end, as Rachmaninov intended.

Horns also roared in the dance of death at the heart of Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem*, in a gripping account which confirmed the stature of the work.

Christopher Morley



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