

Sounds emerging from the darkness

Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra

Adrian Boult Hall

When will the technical staff of the Adrian Boult Hall get to grips with stage lighting – if ever?

It is unacceptable for any musician to have to peer to play any music on any concert platform. Here it seems to be the norm, with centre strings and percussion ever in gloomy shadow.

A challenging programme cracked off with a lively account of the Berlioz Overture *Les Francs-Juges*. A fine brass team soon cemented slightly untidy unison strings who subsequently delivered the famous tune (of television fame) with smiling confidence. Full tutti came over with excitement in spite of frustratingly feeble cymbals.

Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer* were given tender and thoughtful treatment from baritone Leslie John Flanagan. Clear diction complimented natural,

relaxed phrasing and lovely tone.

Conductor Michael Lloyd drew sensitive accompaniment from his players, ranging from velvety, muted strings to funereal heavy-heartedness.

A huge orchestra filled the stage for R Strauss's mind-blowing tone poem *Ein Heldenleben*. Nine horns set the scene effectively but cellos found themselves constantly overwhelmed as they struggled to make their mark.

Offset by interpolations from lugubrious tubas, the carping woodwind critics could have been nastier, with the exception of a splendidly acerbic E flat clarinet. Noble tonic/dominant cadences need far more timpani support.

Tonight's leader Edward Bale accomplished a tour-de-force – sparkling solo pyrotechnics counter'ncing exquisite dialogue with the orchestra – notably an admirable principal horn.

A landmark and seriously challenging composition, this performance was full of fine playing from frenzy to breathless beauty.

Maggie Cotton