

A real winner for the first-time listener

Birmingham Ensemble
Barber Institute
Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra
Adrian Boult Hall

It's not often the phlegmatic reviewer has his heart gladdened and spirits lifted by a first performance, but it happened on Sunday afternoon.

Ivor McGregor's Piano Trio, written for the Birmingham Ensemble and brilliantly premiered by Marcus Barcham-Stevens, Kate Setterfield and Robert Markham, is a real winner, perhaps even a masterpiece.

McGregor's romantic style — strong melodic ideas enlivened by touches of bitonality in the manner of Frank Bridge and others —

poses no problem for the first-time listener, so accessibility is assured. As is often the case, the emotional core comes in the slow movement, a magnificent *largo* set of variations on a hymn-like theme that reaches a climax of gut-wrenching intensity.

The outer movements are just as meaty, if not so high powered, although the opening *allegro* is uncertainly positioned between being darkly serious and whimsical: it ends up as a bit of both. But the Scherzo is a true delight, felicitous and sure of its humorous intent, and its indebtedness partly to Shostakovich's Piano Quintet.

Such a finely constructed and satisfying composition as this Piano Trio undoubtedly deserves to become part of the mainstream 21st century

chamber repertory. Masterpiece? Time will tell.

From one revelation to another. In the evening Birmingham Philharmonic Orchestra under Michael Lloyd gave an absolutely stunning account of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*.

Since taking over as musical director in 1994 Lloyd has transformed these enthusiastic players into what must be one of the best non-professional orchestras in the land. The discipline, quality of sound and musical sensitivity (thanks to Lloyd's technical skills and interpretative insights as a conductor) heard in this well loved work were quite amazing and, in places, almost up to CBSO standards.

True, the violins had some scary moments (H.D.S.-P.'s finger twiddles are a devil to

get right) but much of Elgar's glorious string writing was lustrously delivered, especially Basil Nevison's beautiful cello tune and a truly *nobilmente* Nimrod. The wind and brass (super horns) abounded in elegant touches, such as R.B.T.'s perky falsetto, Dorabella's delectable stammer, and some delicious *rubato* in W.N. And when it came, the Finale (Elgar himself) was thrillingly effulgent, confident and wonderfully brassy.

After such a super performance, Schubert's Unfinished Symphony seemed very small beer. Not so Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, which positively bristled with accurately observed detail, crisp rhythms and abundant energy. A rousing conclusion to a remarkable evening.

David Hart