

Britain's own National Youth Orchestra can compete with the best

By Jessica Duchen

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I'm in the loos in a Durham University college when a bunch of teenage girls bound through the doors. They do their hair and make-up, larking around like kids do anywhere. But, suddenly, they burst into song – and it's the big tune from the first of Rachmaninov's Symphonic Dances. For these are not just any schoolgirls. They're members of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, here for their Easter residential course. As such, they are some of the most talented teenagers in the country.

At the moment, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela is the only classical orchestra of young people in the world. Much talk has focused on them recently; they are currently in London, enjoying a residency at the Royal Festival Hall. The thrilling fruit of El Sistema, which plucks children out of the slums, teaches them music and gives them a new purpose in life, the Venezuelans end their stay with a grand-scale concert on Saturday night. It's been sold out for a year.

But, hot on their heels the next evening, the NYO performs in the same hall – and they shouldn't be overshadowed. In Durham, I'm mesmerised by the sight of them in rehearsal – a vast group, 160-strong, applying themselves to Ravel and Rachmaninov with a palpable fizz of passion and concentration. The conductor, Paul Daniel, treats them with the seriousness he would bring to any professional orchestra.

Ever since it was founded in 1948, the NYO has been a prime training ground for the crème de la crème of musical talent in the UK. The members, aged 13 to 19, are admitted via auditions – there are around four applications for every place. Countless alumni have progressed to stardom: the conductors Sir Simon Rattle and Sir Mark Elder, the composers Judith Weir and Thomas Adès, the trumpeter Alison Balsom, the cellist Guy Johnston – the list goes on and on.

Some of today's ensemble, though not all, will likewise enter into the music profession. Melanie, the principal oboe, is already at the Royal Academy of Music. The orchestra's leader, Michael Foyle, a 17-year-old violinist from

Ayrshire, is spoilt for choice: having won his section of the BBC Young Musician of the Year as a pianist, he's deciding between scholarships to the country's top music colleges and Cambridge.

Change is in the air, though. Now, at the three annual courses, the youngsters do more than just learn the notes. Dance workshops enhance Ravel's *La Valse* and tricky contemporary pieces by George Benjamin and Thomas Adès. New partnerships are flourishing – notably a connection with the Northern Sinfonia (the principals coach the NYO section leaders) and its home at The Sage, Gateshead (regular NYO concerts). And under-25s can buy NYO concert tickets for just £5. This is only the beginning as the NYO spreads its word.

Perhaps the SBYO's high-profile achievements have prodded the NYO's administration into taking a fresh look at how its own organisation functions. It's not practical for the NYO to go into every primary school in the country and give children instruments, as El Sistema does – but it fulfils a different function in a different cultural context, within which there's room to expand the means by which it can inspire other youngsters. And maybe it needed a little new thinking: it's astounding to learn that the forthcoming Royal Festival Hall performance is the first time the orchestra has played at London's premier concert hall for 18 years.

So, by all means marvel at the Venezuelan visitors, but don't forget our own crack team of youngsters. Let's hear it for the National Youth Orchestra – of Great Britain.

The National Youth Orchestra plays at the Royal Festival Hall, London on 19 April. Box office: 0871 663 2500