

Prom 18: Barenboim/West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, Royal Albert Hall

A fitting crosstown curtain raiser to the Olympics opening night

Jessica Duchon | Saturday 28 July 2012

It's been quite a journey, from Beethoven's First Symphony to his Ninth in eight days. The Red Arrows even gave us a fly-past to celebrate at the end... Yes, the mighty 'Choral' Symphony, containing Schiller's manifesto of human unity, coincided with the Olympics' opening night and started early so that everyone could catch the ceremony – and so that Daniel Barenboim could zip from podium to stadium as one of eight great humanitarians who together carried in the Olympic flag.

Barenboim conducts Beethoven not as the last of early music, but as the first of modern. This creation, in which symphonic form burst its boundaries, set the precedent that later composers strove to match, especially Mahler. And Barenboim gave the Ninth a near-Mahlerian treatment as an epic journey from darkness to light.

His attention falls to the interrelation of macrocosm and microcosm: the whole is a narrative, the definition of detail articulates its message. The first movement emerged bleak and angry; pointed up instants – such as a lingering on a note that tips into headlong descent – added to its communicative strength. The second movement continued with absolute seriousness of purpose, the atmosphere turning on the axis of the woodwind as they introduce the work's first hint of sunshine.

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra's woodwind section deserves a gold medal. Rarely in any orchestra do you hear tone quite so gorgeous and ensemble so unified, each individual's artistry flowering to the full within the whole. Through the symphony they became a group of soloists within the larger ensemble, Beethoven's harbingers of hope.

After a Mahlerian-scale pause, the Adagio molto was first cousin to the Adagietto of Mahler's Fifth: a great-hearted meditation, with moments of hold-your-breath magic over hushed deepenings of colour.

So to the choral finale and its 'Ode to Joy'. The National Youth Choir of Great

Britain gave their proud all. But placing the soloists at the back, alongside the choir, didn't work to advantage. Tenor Michael König – replacing Peter Seiffert – sounded faint; soprano Anna Samuil veered from steely to shrill. The mezzo-soprano Waltraud Meier had little opportunity to shine. It was only the ever magnificent bass René Pape who delivered the necessary pizzazz.

The WEDO can't bring world peace. But as a symbol of what people can achieve against all odds when they really try, it takes some beating. This unforgettable concert spoke as much about the unity of humankind as the Olympic opening ceremony itself – and the music was much better.