

London Symphony Orchestra, Tim Garland premiere, Barbican, review

A concert with a great beginning but the rest of the night was distinctly patchy. Rating: * * *



Mightily impressive: The London Symphony Orchestra Photo: ©-Gautier-Deblonde

By Ivan Hewett

6:26PM BST 06 May 2011

It's been a wonderful few weeks for those brazen trumpeters of the LSO. A few weeks back they transported us to a hot Mexican pueblo in Michael Daugherty's *Fire and Blood*. And in Thursday night's all-American concert they wafted us off to Cuba, Philip Cobb conjuring up a vibrato in Gershwin's *Cuban Overture* that stayed just the right side of vulgarity.

Everybody else struck exactly the same tone, reminding us that the LSO is Britain's best American orchestra. The maracas and the guero clicked and scraped with tropical hip-swaying languor, and Andrew Marriner's solo clarinet had a nice tender nostalgia. Most telling were the little woodwind interludes, rounded with the care you'd expect in a Mozart serenade.

So, a great beginning. The performance of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* wasn't quite on the same level, partly because soloist Wayne Marshall seemed so determined to show the piece who was boss. The fast passages had a steely authority that was impressive but unsmiling, and the two cadenzas seemed somehow over-muscled and elaborate.

Then came the evening's brand-new piece, a double concerto for percussion and saxophone. The composer Tim Garland (who also acted as one of the two soloists) is one of those jazz players who has a hankering for the seriousness and formal precision of "classical music". This new concerto was certainly well-shaped, launching off with a fast movement that gradually assembled punchy, rhythmicised fragments into a continuity.

The finale went the other way, beginning with something continuous — an insistent "click-track" beat - which the ensuing music tried hard to subvert. It was neat, clever and perfectly anonymous.

Only in the central "Nocturne for the Sleepless" did a genuine improvisational spirit appear, and as a result the piece actually came alive. The orchestra's slow hesitant chorale was punctuated by languorous vibraphone solos — beautifully played by LSO principal percussionist Neil Percy — and crowned eventually by Garland's ecstatically soaring saxophone.

Thus far it had been a distinctly patchy evening, but in the last piece, the suite from Copland's ballet *Billy the Kid*, everything came together. The performance, under the baton of Francois-Xavier Roth, revealed the piece for what it is: a

masterpiece which takes an ostensibly brash subject — the pursuit and eventual killing of an outlaw — and finds within it a wealth of delicate poetry. In the “Prairie Night” the trumpets once again set the seal on things, this time with a tone of quiet loneliness.

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2018