

Neil Fisher/The Times/10 May

Story-telling season at the London Symphony Orchestra finishes next month, when the orchestra will decamp to “the best of all possible worlds” in Bernstein’s operetta *Candide*. But in this concert, groaning with Cuban rumba, Mexican street dance and a certain blue *Rhapsody*, the LSO players looked very pleased with the world they were in.

And that’s without mentioning the very chummy premiere presented by the composer and saxophonist Tim Garland. The particular cat that got the cream in Garland’s Concerto for Percussion, Saxophone and Orchestra was the LSO’s principal percussionist Neil Percy, beaming with joy to find himself centre stage.

Is this a concerto? More a kind of amplified dialogue, built out of the palpable chemistry between Garland and Percy. Where Garland’s singing soprano saxophone skitters, sometimes soulfully, sometimes manically, across the whole tapestry, Percy’s variable rhythms hook in the rest of the orchestra in three distinct movements.

A drum-led first movement builds to a frenetic, wailing climax. A lyrical middle section spotlights the resonance of the vibraphone and marimba. And in the festive conclusion, Percy gamely alternated between slapping an amp and the rarely-heard hang drum. It’s a riot of colour, but this concerto is also wisely structured and casts the orchestra in supportive, but not superfluous, roles.

The conductor, François-Xavier Roth, sensibly let the soloists lead that one. But the gangly Frenchman had a spread of showpieces in which to show off some snappy moves. Gershwin’s *Cuban Overture* was slinky but tough, sizzling nicely after its initial eruption. And Copland’s *Billy the Kid* had an irresistible panache. The original ballet, with its toe-tapping bandits and rat-a-tat gunfights, is rarely if ever performed. But when the suite is played this well — a highlight being the LSO’s principal trumpeter, Philip Cobb, soaring over the prairies in his moving solo — you want to hear it all over again the moment it finishes.

All this and Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, too? Here it was the pianist Wayne Marshall giving battle in — or rather against — Grofé’s familiar but groaning 1942 orchestration. When he could, Marshall played with sensitivity, though neither he nor Roth inflected one of music’s great fireworks with enough pure charge.