

Massed youths are miraculously refined

THE National Youth Orchestra always brings a sense of occasion to the Proms, and this year was no exception, with its massed ranks of players filling the platform to overflowing. It always likes to give all its musicians the chance to play, and Berlioz here provided the opportunity. As a composer who often used as many players as he could, he would have relished the scale of this performance of his *Symphonie fantastique*.

With eight harps and countless strings and woodwind, the miracle was how refined and coherent it all sounded under Roger Norrington's baton. We have long come to expect professional levels of playing from these young musicians, most of whom are still at school, but the sheer virtuosity of all concerned, not to mention the mature musicality of solo-playing, such as the cor anglais in the middle movement, still invites awe.

Proms 26, 27 & 28

Cuban Night;
NYO/Norrington;
Handel's Messiah

Less awe-inspiring was the concert's tub-thumping first half of ceremonial Walton, Handel and Elgar. Taking his cue from Handel's own practice of using all available instruments to hand, Norrington used the same Berlioz-sized orchestra for the *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, with the result that heaviness stood in for the buoyancy that he usually brings to Baroque music.

Authenticity of a purer kind was on show the following night when Trevor Pinnock directed his English Concert and Choir in Handel's *Messiah*. Here was the light touch that one has come to expect from performances of 18th-century music, with an

international quartet of soloists — Hillevi Martinpelto, Monica Groop, Kurt Streit and Nathan Berg — contributing to an inspiring account of this great masterwork, always kept on the move by Pinnock's brisk tempi and eager sense of continuity.

At the opposite extreme of civilised music-making came the Proms's annual showcase for world music, which, like last year's Irish programme, brought one of its more commercial examples to the Albert Hall. Cuban music is all the rage at the moment, but the overamplification of both groups on offer, Los Van Van and Vocal Sampling, induced aural numbness, a headache and despair more than an ability to gauge any musical value in what they were performing.

Highlights of the 'Messiah' will be shown on BBC2 on August 27

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