



# Beat generations

It's not just power v control — our critic on a week when younger conductors took on the old maestros

*Paul Driver* Published: 13 November 2011

Gianandrea Noseda, until last summer chief conductor of the BBC Philharmonic, bowing out at the Proms, was recently responsible for a magnificent account of Britten's War Requiem with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus at the Barbican. At the Festival Hall, he took charge of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's performance of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, a work that figured in the Proms, in Colin Davis's interpretation with the LSO and Chorus. Davis was originally scheduled to conduct that War Requiem, and a sort of Davis-Noseda requiem counterpoint seems to have developed, for the OAE period-style rendering of the work with the Philharmonia Chorus (dedicated to the memory of Charles Mackerras) offered a signal contrast to the Prom one.

That was an orchestrally full-blooded, grand and spacious performance to fill the Albert Hall, yet with what I took for a visionary intensity, or perhaps a visionary scepticism, that made sense of the work's formal and expressive anomalies: the imbalance between the frenzy of the earlier movements and the dominantly seraphic note of the later ones; the insinuation into the Benedictus of a smooth violin concerto; the military alarms interrupting the Dona Nobis Pacem. These last, in Noseda's reading, had, for me, a certain perfunctoriness, a bizarrely anecdotal quality rather than a dramatic inevitability. Perhaps the very superbness with which he propelled the restlessly inventive Kyrie, Gloria and Credo — the instrumental lines not merely incisive but electric, the solo singing (from the rear-placed Anne Ellersiek, Michaela Wehrum-Gandenberger, Mark Adler and Patrick Schramm) heroic and unflagging, the chorus magnificent — helped to make the strange succeeding world of emotion odder.

His feet left the podium at one point during the Gloria, and this was no self-conscious Bernsteinian leap; but driving the complex Benedictus and Agnus Dei into focus is more difficult. Matthew Truscott was a fine violin soloist in the Benedictus, and Andrew Watts's period bassoon graced the opening of the Agnus Dei. But I began to wonder if a "period" scrutiny, necessarily experimental, of a work that is already (and permanently!) a kind of experiment wasn't ill advised. It is not a question of stripping the film of familiarity from the music, but of adding something. You have to ask Davis what that thing is.

A couple of nights later at the Festival Hall, his near-contemporary veteran maestro Neville Marriner was on the podium. His account of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No 4 formed the second half of a concert given by the singularly named I, Culture orchestra, a body of young professionals from Poland and the six countries of the Eastern Partnership, convened by Poland to mark its 2011

presidency of the European Union. At 87, Marriner is a startlingly limber wielder of a baton, hardly changed in appearance, and was stylishly able to make this large, weighty structure taut and gripping. Perhaps some light and shade were missing from the playing, but it lacked nothing of ardour, and one felt the new orchestra was firmly in business.

The first half — Prokofiev's barbaric Scythian Suite, set against the refined folkishness of Szymanowski's Symphony No 4 (*Symphonie Concertante*), the Polish Peter Jablonski a brilliant piano soloist — had been impressively directed by the Polish (but London-based) Pavel Kotla, and his return to deliver the rousing encore — a strenuous Mazurka by one Stanislaw Moniuszko — was an inadvertent lesson in conducting. His sheer physical power, at the age of 39, did seem to be transmitted directly to the players, and the contrast with Marriner was momentarily palpable. Conducting is a mysterious art, but evidently also partakes of the nature of an elemental force.

At Queen Elizabeth Hall, Pierre-Laurent Aimard gave the first of two recitals in the International Piano Series (the second on December 7) ending the Southbank's diverse celebrations of Liszt's bicentenary. Each programme is an unbroken (even by applause) sequence interspersing his music with context running from a rarely heard Wagner sonata to Marco Stroppa's *Tangata Manu*, written in 1995. This exotic evocation of Easter Island and homage to the composer Berio was placed in a central group of pieces exploring Liszt's use of rapid figuration, exemplified by *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, from Book Three of his *Années de pèlerinage*, and Ravel's homage to it, *Jeux d'eau*. Liszt's birdsongful *Légende No 1, St François d'Assise*, was balanced on the near-symmetrical programme by Messiaen's *Le Traquet stapazin*, from his *Catalogue d'oiseaux*; and *Années de pèlerinage* selections framed the sequence, the first, *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este: Threnodie*, segueing almost unnoticeably into the fourth of Bartok's *Four Dirges, Op 9*. This was an absorbing, short (80-minute) and concentrated evening, the execution sparkling, the conception, though a touch didactic, fascinating: the recital not as a series of discrete "acts", but a single, if marvellously leavened, lump of musical history.