

## I, Culture Orchestra at the Festival Hall

Neil Fisher

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What's the next best thing to an elixir of youth? If you are the 87-year-old Neville Marriner, the answer is an elixir of youth orchestra. It is now more than half a century since Marriner founded the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. Taking the baton for the second half of this concert, he looked spryer than some maestros half his age.

For this we must thank the Polish Government and the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. I, Culture Orchestra, though curiously named, is their eye-grabbing cultural initiative, inspired by the Polish Presidency of the EU Council. The orchestra brings together young Polish musicians with players from six, more troubled European nations: Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It is twenty years since those countries left the Soviet Union, but if I, Culture's Tchaikovsky is anything to go by, ties to a shared Russian heritage die hard. As tripped through by Marriner from the podium, the orchestra showed their mettle in a full-blooded performance of the Fourth Symphony that had swagger and plenty of lively detail. Raw edges — a few strident notes from woodwind and brass, and string articulation lacking some definition — are to be expected in a group that is so fresh out of the starting blocks.

The first half, entrusted to a Polish conductor, Pavel Kotla, was less successful, though neither Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* nor Szymanowski's *Symphonie Concertante* are easy to pull off. The former is Prokofiev at his most violent and loud; Kotla kept it together, but without releasing the piece's elemental power.

The Szymanowski, a hybrid of symphony and piano concerto, depends on lightning exchanges between soloist and orchestra, and minutely-calibrated shifts of dynamic and metre. Peter Jablonski played the daunting piano part with admirable focus, but it never quite took off. Far more enjoyable from the Polish music canon was the encore, the yomping mazurka from Poland's national opera, Moniuszko's *Halka*. That was just the right amount of presidential back-slapping.

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