



arts Critics

Home Culture Vulture blog Live reviews Art Dance Theatre Special reports Help
 News Film & Music weekly CD reviews Classical Jazz Rock & pop Imagine art after Critics

Andrew Clements



Search this site

All stories

Reviews only

Andrew Clements

Latest review ▶
 Latest feature ▶
 Archive ▶

Recent reviews

[Philharmonia/Salonen,
 Queen Elizabeth Hall,
 London](#)

[CD: Vaughan Williams:
 Songs of Travel; The
 House of Life; Four Poems
 by Frederick Shove](#)

[CD: Mendelssohn: The
 Piano Trios](#)

[CD: Hindemith: The Long
 Christmas Dinner](#)

[CD: Monteverdi: Madrigals,
 Book 8, La Venexiana](#)

Classical

Philharmonia/Salonen

★★★★ Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

Andrew Clements

Wednesday November 9, 2005

Every time the Philharmonia gives a concert in the Queen Elizabeth Hall the players must learn more about the special challenges of performing in their temporary London home. Not that there's a hint that any of these challenges has proved impossible - the standards in this all-Russian programme with Esa-Pekka Salonen were superbly high - but there is still the occasional acoustical oddity. Who would have predicted, for instance, that in the QEH's close-up sound picture a piccolo would prove harder to integrate into the orchestral fabric than the heavy brass?

In Salonen's insistent account of Mussorgsky's Night on Bare Mountain, the instrument flared uncomfortably at some of the climaxes, though as this was the original version of the piece rather than Rimsky-Korsakov's more sanitised re-orchestration which used to be the standard, perhaps the resulting rawness wasn't out of place.

In Stravinsky's complete Firebird ballet score, however, being on such intimate terms with the orchestra was pure gain. There are few repertory works that are orchestrated with more subtlety and imagination than Firebird, and touches like the divisi double basses in the opening bars half using bows, half pizzicato, or the use of Wagner tubas to give an extra veil of menace to Kashchei's appearance in the lead up to the infernal dance are the kind of niceties that are so perfectly judged they go unnoticed in a larger space, but still colour the score indelibly.

If Salonen's performance was slightly detached - the redemptive tune in the final bars can pack a much bigger emotional punch - all its details were perfectly rendered, and he and the orchestra (who are about to tour Europe together) did an equally expert job in accompanying Francois-Frédéric Guy in Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto. Guy made light of the considerable technical difficulties of the solo part, which he played dazzlingly, but

in doing so he also blunted the work's rasping edge a bit; this is Prokofiev really playing up to the role of enfant terrible, but Guy sometimes made him seem just too well brought up.



Philharmonia/Salonen

Reviewed by: Richard Whitehouse

Mussorgsky

Night on the Bare Mountain [Original Version]

Prokofiev

Piano Concerto No.2 in G minor, Op.16

Stravinsky

The Firebird [Original 1910 Version]

François-Frédéric Guy (piano)

Philharmonia Orchestra
Esa-Pekka Salonen

Queen Elizabeth Hall,
London

Thursday, November 03,
2005

[Printer Friendly View](#)

The Philharmonia Orchestra's new season continued with a Russian programme more or less familiar. Night on the Bare Mountain was given in Mussorgsky's original version from 1867 – a Gothic orchestral scherzo compared to the earnest and relatively insipid tone poem it becomes in Rimsky-Korsakov's increasingly less played overhaul; the four continuous sections evoking a St John's Eve wake whose satanic qualities have a distinctly ironic edge. Esa-Pekka Salonen gave the music due expressive license and, though not all the instrumental balances were solved (Mussorgsky's Berliozian lack of inhibition would have shocked even the French master had he been able to hear the piece), the sense of an orchestral soundworld almost intuitively taking shape was vividly conveyed.

If Mussorgsky was here following his own convictions, Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto finds the 22-year-old intent on cowing his audience into submission with a potent if unwieldy amalgam of late Romantic rhetoric and proto-Modernist gestures. A combination that can seem to succeed more by luck than judgement, but with François-Frédéric Guy as soloist, there was no likelihood of the piece sounding rough-edged or bombastic. He brought equivocal poise to the twin themes of the Andantino, such that the cadenza transformed material with a keen sense of exploding its previous containment.

Initially passive in support, Salonen ensured the climactic return of the opening motif was balefully majestic – matching Guy in the coruscating agility brought to the scherzo and the sardonic wit of the Intermezzo, whose suave sense of the grotesque can seldom have been more convincingly rendered. The oddly-constituted variations on a Tchaikovskian theme that largely comprises the final Allegro had a finely-judged momentum, with the return of the movement's initial toccata music no mere closing flourish, but an integrated – even inevitable – end to this most wilfully impressive of twentieth-century concertos. Following his often-convincing account of Brahms's D minor in Birmingham earlier this year, Guy is clearly a pianist with much to contribute to the still-too-limited concerto repertoire.

Stravinsky's The Firebird is hardly a rarity now in its original version (your reviewer clearly having encountered it more often than the Philharmonia's programme annotator Wendy Thompson!) – to those below the Philharmonia itself last played Firebird complete in London in October 2003 under Thierry Fischer – and it's a work that ought to bring the best out of this orchestra and Salonen. So it proved over much of the work's duration: Salonen's expressive nudges in the 'Introduction' were a little calculated, while a sense that he was more obviously 'conducting' the numerous transitional passages and leaving the main sections to the orchestra's executive capabilities (hardly an error of judgement in this instance) meant what emerged was a reading unusually coherent overall, but whose highpoints often failed so to register. Yet there was no lack of drive in the 'Infernal Dance', and the 'Apotheosis' emerged out of its rapt stillness to make a properly affirmative impact. Salonen cued in several offstage brass entries that, now the complete ballet has returned to favour, have emerged from eight decades of oblivion. The QEH acoustic strained to accommodate it all, but only those in front stalls risked serious discomfort.



Seen and Heard

Editor: Marc Bridle

Regional Editor: Bill Kenny

Webmaster: Len Mullenger

[Latest News](#)

[Collector's Corner](#)

[Earlier Reviews](#)

[Reviewer Profiles](#)

[CD Reviews](#)

[Music Web Home Page](#)

[Seen and Heard Home Page](#)



Search Music Web with [FreeFind](#)



Any Review or Article

Seen and Heard Concert Review

Mussorgsky, Prokofiev, Stravinsky: François-Frédéric Guy, piano, Philharmonia Orchestra, Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor, Queen Elizabeth Hall, 3.11.2005 (TJH)

Mussorgsky – *Night on the Bare Mountain*
Prokofiev – Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor
Stravinsky – *The Firebird* (complete ballet)

I was a teensy bit sceptical about the programme for this concert. Not about the musical line-up – an all-Russian concert is after all the sort of thing the Philharmonia excels at – but about whether it was physically possible to cram enough players into the tiny Queen Elizabeth Hall to give Stravinsky's *Firebird* in its original 1910 version, as promised. Quadruple woodwind, offstage brass, celesta, xylophone, glockenspiel, piano, three harps. . . it was going to be one hell of a tight squeeze in a venue more used to hosting string quartets and mid-sized ensembles. So I brought along a list of the instrumentation and did a headcount.

I couldn't be absolutely sure, in the way one cannot be sure how many snowflakes are in a snowstorm, but – apart from one harp – everyone seemed to be present and correct. They even managed to find room for conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, though he had to jostle more than a few elbows to get to his platform. Once there, of course, his conducting was typically first-rate. The famous, subsonic rumble which opens the work had a strangely melancholic air to it; it brightened only when the *Firebird* itself appeared, bringing with it some virtuosic playing from the strings, who must have had to keep a constant eye out for their neighbours' dangerously proximate bow-arms. But it was at the first interruption by the offstage brass – three trumpets and four tubas sounding a klaxon call from the rear of the auditorium – that this *Firebird* really took flight. The build-up to the demonic Katschei's first appearance was truly thrilling: the sound of the massive orchestra may have been almost deafening in the tiny QEH, but every strand of sound was clearly audible and carefully delineated by Salonen and his players.

The only real problem with this unexpurgated *Firebird* was that it rather outstayed its welcome, a common problem that illustrates just what good sense Stravinsky had when he recycled its best numbers into the more satisfying, and more popular, suites of 1919 and 1945. The same good sense cannot be discerned in Rimsky-Korsakov's decision to 'improve' Mussorgsky's *Night on a Bare Mountain*, however: in 'tidying-up' Mussorgsky's distinctly rough-hewn orchestration, he robbed the work of much of its unsettling atmosphere. Salonen showed just how much more interesting the original was, even as a rather brisk opener; but nice though it was to hear this less familiar version, the QEH acoustic proved ultimately unsuitable; *Night on a Bare Mountain* is all about its creepy ambiance and spooky apparitions, both of which were effectively neutered in this venue.

At any rate, the real treat of the evening was sandwiched between these two fiery favourites. Sergei Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto is not nearly as well-

known as the famous Third, and the reason for this is not hard to discern. Just ten minutes into the temperamental first movement comes one of the most hair-raising, barnstorming, finger-twisting cadenzas in all of the literature, a bevy of whirling arpeggios and chaotic dissonances which even Prokofiev found a challenge to perform. Thursday's pianist – the promising young Frenchman François-Frédéric Guy – had just the mildest hint of panic in his eyes as he approached this musical gauntlet, but he proved a worthy adversary to Prokofiev's demonic inspiration, carrying off his soloist's role with aplomb. Although his playing was perhaps a little too refined for the spiky asceticism Prokofiev demands, Guy nonetheless found a good balance between modernity and slushy post-Romanticism, bringing out heaps of detail in the process. After a particularly fiendish passage later in the work, he could be glimpsed lifting his hands from the keyboard in a slightly camp flourish, like a more elegant, less well-fed version of Liberace. He looked like nothing so much as a footballer celebrating a particularly satisfying goal: precisely what his performance was.

Tristan Jakob-Hoff

[Back to the Top](#) [Back to the Index Page](#)

[return to where you came from](#)

