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Prom 42, Buniatishvili, Estonian Festival Orchestra, Järvi review – bright lights from the North

A first-rate ensemble wrenches beauty from the abyss

by [Boyd Tonkin](#) | Tuesday, 14 August 2018

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Flesh and spirit: Arvo Pärt at the Royal Albert Hall

All images Chris Christodoulou/BBC

Music-lovers who normally balk at the sight of national colours in a concert hall would surely have forgiven the little Estonian flags – in stripes of blue, black and white – that waved happily at the conclusion of this Prom. Under the baton of Paavo Järvi, dynamic and resourceful heir to a conducting dynasty, the Estonian Festival Orchestra came to London to celebrate the centenary of the first phase of the nation's independence from Russian rule – a freedom lost in 1940 and not fully reclaimed until 1991. Yet Järvi steered not a corny carnival of patriotic uplift but a thoughtfully balanced compilation of works drawn from around the Nordic and Baltic coasts.

In his sure hands, and with the support of this strikingly impressive ad hoc band that combines young local players with visiting luminaries from top European orchestras, this was a programme that both ravished the ear and exercised the mind. Järvi and his ensemble, first created in 2011 for the summer festival in Pärnu - this year's experience was described yesterday on The Arts Desk by David Nice - sounded consistently fine, with no weak links and zero sense of an impromptu scratch band playing on the hoof. The presence of the young Georgian pianist Khatia Buniatishvili as soloist – another huge talent from a small-ish post-Soviet republic – set the scene for an evening of big, but never brash, noise from the little guys. All questions of history and identity aside, the Estonians evoked a proper sense of occasion in playing that married festive warmth and zest with unflagging

“ Pärt's raids on the void built into an austere cathedral of sound ”

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focus and discipline.



We began with the Third Symphony of Estonian musical icon Arvo Pärt (pictured above with Järvi and the orchestra last night) – an icon who, rather thrillingly, materialised in the flesh to take two bows at the end. Now a vigorous nearly-83-year-old, Pärt began as a party-line serialist but passed through the hybrid, questing tonalities of this piece (from 1971) en route to the mystic minimalism of his much-revered later works. Premiered by Paavo Järvi's father Neeme, who conducted the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra in the work at the 1989 Proms, the symphony already bears the marks of Pärt's growing immersion in the contemplative, hieratic aural world of medieval plainchant and early-Renaissance polyphony.

Sudden instrumental shapes and figures mysteriously crystallise out of rapt silence or low repeated motifs in the strings. If Pärt's tolling of tubular bells transport us to the monastery cloister, then the instrumental cries that float above the emptiness – clarinet, oboe, trumpets – suggest the plaintive loneliness of a soul that has mislaid its faith. Finally, a great percussive thunderstorm proclaims the day of judgment already hinted at a "dies irae" motif in the brass. If Pärt's "tintinnabuli" theory of composition still remains (to some of us at least) opaque, then these slowly cumulative series of raids on the void built into an austere cathedral of sound.



After that, Grieg's Piano Concerto looked on the face of things like a chance to slip back into something more comfortable, and comforting. But Järvi's shrewd alignment of the Norwegian's over-familiar blockbuster with Pärt let us hear the development of the evening's theme. In all three works – supremely so, in the Sibelius Fifth that came after the interval – musical coherence must be dragged out of the abyss in shards and chunks, then carved and moulded into something resembling unity. Meanwhile, centrifugal forces of fragmentation and breakdown always menace a hard-won civility. It would be tempting, if facile, to detect here some sort of pattern of fragile and isolated human settlements stranded amid the pitiless forests, lakes and mountains of the north. At any rate, the Estonians and Buniatishvili (pictured above) made me hear not Grieg the youthful wizard who spins one ear-tickling subject after another into a fancy cloak of melody but an anxious seeker overwhelmed by the vast and varied sonic landscape around him.

From her express-train introduction onwards, Buniatishvili offered plenty of old-school drama and lyricism (more so, perhaps, than any Nordic pianist these days). For me, though, the beating heart of the performance arrived with the adagio, where she conjured up a radiant, sunset stillness perfectly offset by the Estonians' gorgeous strings. The orchestra's rustic tavern stomp of the finale paved the way for Buniatishvili's flamboyant farewell – a thrillingly enjoyable sign-off, no doubt, but

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for Buniatishvili's rhapsodic fervour – a thrillingly enjoyable sign-off, no doubt, but one that left me wondering what another sort of pianist might have crafted with this ensemble. Or, indeed, Buniatishvili herself in the vein of her encore: Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, at this moment, and in this performance, the ultimate chill-out track after an all-night Nordic rave.



Järvi served Sibelius's Fifth Symphony as a lovingly-prepared signature dish. Just over the water in Estonia, the Finnish titan virtually counts as a national composer. He eschewed broad-shouldered grandeur (leave that to the Germans?) in favour of supple and shapely phrasing that gave all the players – bassoon or trumpet as much as the all-important horns – their chance to shine. With the ear attuned by Pärt, even by Grieg, you registered the slow, painful work of building a shelter of sound against nothingness. Järvi restored passion and danger to the astounding first movement of the symphony's final version – with its delirious, accelerating scherzo that rushes like a spring river in spate through a murmuring forest. In the consoling "swan hymn" of the third movement, he never lost touch with the unappeased nervous tension that always lurks under that great song of affirmation we hear in the horns (reliably superb), strings and then trumpets.

Far from playing Sibelius as a grandiose done deal, a known quantity, the Estonians bravely shared the doubt and dread that never leaves this music – written, in frequent sorrow, during and after the Great War. You felt that they had truly earned the high-spirited, vernacular fun of their encores: Lepo Sumera's "Spring Fly", and Hugo Alfvén's "Herd Maiden's Dance".

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