

Reviews Spring 2016



[National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain/Järvi review – exuberant and extrovert](#)
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Kristjan Järvi coaxes his outstanding teenage musicians into an exhilarating performance every bit as fiery as their programme's theme

Fire was the overall theme of this spring tour concert by the National Youth Orchestra under Kristjan Järvi, the word itself featuring in the titles of all three works in the programme.

The centrepiece was American composer Michael Daugherty's violin concerto, *Fire and Blood*, which comprises a happy-go-lucky melange of styles, though the overall mood is rhythmically exuberant and commensurately extrovert in terms of orchestral colour. Premiered in 2003, the concerto celebrates Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry Murals*, which memorialised the city's once bustling automobile assembly lines. The artist's volcanic spirit is portrayed in the opening movement, while its slow successor recalls that of his wife and fellow artist Frida Kahlo; in tribute to both, the spicy tang of characteristic Mexican rhythms and instruments flavours the entire piece.

Not much older than the orchestra's all-teenage personnel was 21-year-old soloist Chad Hoopes, whose international career began with his win in the Menuhin Competition back in 2008. Though Daugherty's solo part is both arduous and technically demanding, Hoopes made light of its difficulties in a performance that was as comprehensively assured as it was profoundly expressive. His Telemann encore revealed further and subtler facets to his artistry.

The two remaining works were both by the young Stravinsky, his brief but brilliant showpiece *Fireworks* and the ballet *The Firebird*, performed complete rather than in the form of the standard suite. Järvi's platform movements seemed aptly balletic, too, as he occasionally exhorted his players to rise to grand climaxes by leaping high into the air.

Whatever his gestures, they worked. As well as the NYO's technically impeccable musicianship in these virtuosic scores, the outstanding commitment demonstrated by all orchestral departments proved exhilarating. Their sole encore – the uproarious Dance of the Tumblers from Tchaikovsky's incidental music to *The Snow Maiden* – brought the house down.

[Hoopes, National Youth Orchestra, Järvi, RFH](#)
[The Arts Desk, David Nice – 5* \(09/04/16\)](#)

On the panel to judge a competition between 14 Dutch school orchestras in Amsterdam's Concertgebouw last month, I couldn't resist using my speech to compare their state-school provenance with our own divisive musical education. I was thinking of two figures I'd been given – that when the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain started, only five per cent of its young musicians were from private and public schools, whereas now it was 85 per cent.

Last week I learned the latter figure was wrong: current CEO and Artistic Director Sarah Alexander has got it down to 50/50, working on the notion that if a state school musician is less polished at auditions, he or she may stand to gain more from the experience. Standards have not been compromised; last night's was as stunning a concert as any from the NYO, with an extra adrenalin rush from the youngest of the Järvi conducting dynasty, Kristjan, no less individual than his brother or father. Without a doubt the culminating performance of Stravinsky's complete *Firebird* ballet was the most physically exciting I've ever heard. That its livestream, available for a limited time, wasn't taken up by BBC Four is a great pity – it would have won orchestral music new admirers – but at least the Southbank is reaching out to showcase this extraordinary institution in a way that the Barbican did not. Watch this space for further developments with its new associate orchestra.

“As each of the works on the programme begins with ‘fire’,” writes leader Millie Ashton in the programme, “there’s no way NYO’s energy and totally teenage passion won’t do so.” The least familiar flames came from American composer Michael Daugherty’s *Fire and Blood*, a showcase for the orchestra and the soloist, Chad Hoopes, who won first prize in the Young Artists Division of the Menuhin Competition 10 years ago (the current London competition is running this week).

He’s the real thing: full, passionate tone, great intensity and musical intelligence. Daugherty’s concerto, though entertaining and tuneful, isn’t. Sounding like Khachaturian on a good day (which that composer’s Violin Concerto isn’t), its outer movements homaging the American motor industry are full of lively syncopations and opportunities for the large percussion section to switch instruments, as well as a good mix of double and treble stopping runs and singing lines for the soloist. The slow movement, “River Rouge”, runs on too long, and the mountain eventually gives birth to a molehill in the mariachi tune led by two trumpets (superb Tijuana touches here from Aaron Akugbo and Adam Meyer). Still, it was wonderful to see the rapport between Hoopes and Järvi, and the encore – a movement from Telemann’s Ninth Suite which Hoopes had played in the first round of the competition – provided a needful drop in temperature.

There was nowhere in the two Stravinsky works to relax; Järvi is a coiled spring bringing feverishness even to the more feminine dances of *The Firebird*. His full-body expressionism wasn’t to all tastes, but as another musician put it, he gives energy to the young players rather than leaching it from them. You could hear what you saw as *Fireworks* exploded towards its final display; you could gauge the results from the huge string section – 20 each of violin sections, 12 double basses bringing revelations to *The Firebird*’s “Infernal Dance” – on which he lavished the most love, with Los Angeles/Hollywood Bowl voluptuousness at times. Neither woodwind or brass seemed to suffer from the relative lack of attention.

It’s also worth remembering that Stravinsky was only 25 when Diaghilev found himself captivated by *Fireworks* and (eventually) gave him the job of a long first original score for the Ballets Russes. The *Firebird*’s first half can feel over mimetic, over languorous, but not in the hands of players who are young enough to treasure its naïve storytelling. Surtitles with the

action, Philharmonia-style, would have helped, but all eyes were still on Järvi and his players. Winsome woodwind solos, outstanding especially from oboist Eleanor Sullivan, carried the narrative; after the devastating climactic dance, faster than I've ever heard it but also exemplary in its clarity, and an unusually slow Berceuse led by bassoonist Lucy Dundas, the soul of ogre Kashchey inside an egg was smashed to brilliant smithereens and out of the magical string tremolos – these players can do the most sophisticated pianissimos – came an absolutely perfect horn solo from Livi Gandee.

The riotous happy ending was even capped by the encore, Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Tumblers" from his *Snow Maiden* music – usually overshadowed by Rimsky-Korsakov's version, but the Järvi family always find unusual encores. With standing trumpets and audience participation, it had a touch of the Simón Bolívar Orchestra's showbiz about it, and that's something we could all do with to add to the sheer joy of youthful music-making.

[NYO/Järvi at Festival Hall](#)
[The Times, Rebecca Franks – 4* \(11/04/2016\)](#)

With 164 musicians just about crammed on to the Festival Hall stage, the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain made a big impression before they even played a note. And then with the explosive fizz and colourful bursts of Stravinsky's *The Fireworks*, the touch paper was lit for a concert of fire, vitality and lots of smiles.

The virtuosic, fire-themed programme of Stravinsky and Michael Daugherty showcased the orchestra's strengths; it might be a massive ensemble but these teenage musicians play with impressive discipline, and they also play with palpable energy — so much energy — enthusiasm and optimism. They are a joy to see and hear.

The first significant work on the programme harnessed that power. Daugherty's hugely appealing 2003 violin concerto *Fire and Blood*, inspired by the Mexican artist Diego Rivera's murals for Edsel Ford, blends the motor rhythms of the North American car industry with a taste of Mexico. Harp and marimba colour the sound world, as do maracas and a mariachi band. There's a hint of Copland, an echo of Britten — but the vibrant eloquence is all Daugherty's own. Sharing an easy rapport with the NYO players, the soloist Chad Hoopes, 21, was a fervent interpreter with a gorgeous lyrical sound. His Telemann encore was spellbinding.

And then it was the turn of *The Firebird* (1910). This ballet, written for the Ballets Russes impresario Sergei Diaghilev, was Stravinsky's big break and the result was an exotic score of fairytale darkness and delicacy. The NYO did the music proud. Perhaps there could have been more mystery in the shadows but the highlights were numerous: beautifully clear horn and haunting bassoon solos; a brutal Infernal Dance with chords crashing down like guillotines; an ending of bold jubilation, with fierce up-bows from the strings. It was all masterminded by the irrepressible Kristjan Järvi, who jumped, sashayed and grinned the whole way through.

[Blaze of Youth indeed - Chad Hoopes, Kristjan Järvi and the National Youth Orchestra, Southbank Centre](#)
[Planet Hugill, Robert Hugill – 5* \(09/04/2016\)](#)

Fireworks all round from over 160 young performers

At the reception before the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain's concert at the Royal Festival Hall on 8 April 2016, it was announced that the orchestra is becoming one of the

Southbank Centre's associate orchestras. The concert itself, conducted by Kristjan Järvi featured Stravinsky's *Fireworks* and complete *Firebird* ballet along with Michael Daugherty's *Fire and Blood* with violin soloist Chad Hoopes. Hoopes was the 2008 Junior Prize winner at the Menuhin Competition and the concert formed part of the celebrations for this year's centenary Menuhin Competition.

A very full Royal Festival Hall platform saw more than 160 young performers on stage. They opened with Stravinsky's early *Fireworks*, a showpiece where the young composer showed both his indebtedness to and independence from his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov. Stravinsky's ear for orchestral colour is certainly striking, and the work encouraged Diaghilev to commission *The Firebird* from Stravinsky. *Fireworks* was notable for the fascinating flickering, impressionistic texture which Järvi got from the young musicians. It was a lovely fluid performance, with some brilliant detail.

Contemporary American composer Michael Daugherty wrote *Fire and Blood* in 2003. It is a three movement concerto inspired by the car plants of the American motor industry, notably the murals which Ford commissioned from Diego Rivera which are full of machines and men at work. Daugherty's concerto is a large scale, rather romantic piece with some jazz influences in the writing. Whilst often big and vibrant, Daugherty's scoring is often quite neo-classical and very sympathetic to the violin which is often in dialogue with the orchestra.

Chad Hoopes gave a very virile and impressively commanding account of the violin part. Lyrical yet complex in style, with more violent interruptions from the orchestra, we even had something like a cadenza. The final movement showcased the violin and the carefulness of Daugherty's scoring, creating a sense of vibrancy, colour and vigour whilst never overwhelming the soloist. The performance from all concerned was impressive, with the young players of the orchestra achieving a finely sympathetic support to Hoopes' violin. We even got an encore at the end as Hoopes played some unaccompanied Telemann, a movement he had played in the first round of the Menuhin Competition.

The second half was devoted to the full *Firebird* ballet. Now here I have to make a confession, in concert I far prefer Stravinsky's suites and find that much of the walking about to music required in ballet does not transfer well to the concert hall despite the brilliance of Stravinsky's orchestration. Also, Järvi seemed to be more interested in the luscious colour and detail of the score rather than dramatic impetus. The performance was full of gorgeous moments and stunningly detailed playing, but the players were never quite able to give us the sustain vigour and brilliant sense of impulse that they did with their encore, when the orchestra positively exploded. There were explosions in the climaxes, and terrifying and brilliant they were, but I felt a lack of overall impetus.

But from the wonderfully mysterious there was much to enjoy in the Stravinsky, a lovely transparency to the impressionistic scoring which required stunning control from the performers, and a brilliance which turned on a pin as the atmosphere changed, so that real violence would immediately be replaced by quiet intensity and the whole ended with a shattering climax.

I have to confess that I had no idea what the orchestra's encore was (and have subsequently been informed that it was the Dance of the Buffoons (Dance of the Tumblers) from Tchaikovsky's *The Snow Maiden*) but what I do know is that the young players exploded with virile and vibrant colour, in a performance full of energy and delicacy. A brilliant end to a brilliant evening.

The concert was live-streamed on the Southbank Centre's website and is now available on their YouTube channel.

**National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain/Kristjan Järvi – Fireworks and Firebird –
Chad Hoopes plays Fire and Blood
Classical Source, Brian Barford – 08/04/16**

It's always a pleasure to encounter the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. This programme was perfectly tailored to its outsize qualities (twelve double basses for starters), presented in conjunction with the current Menuhin Competition. The evening's theme was the Blaze of Youth and titular fire linked the three pieces.

Stravinsky's *Fireworks*, written as a wedding present for Rimsky-Korsakov's daughter, found the NYO giving a performance of alertness and polish. The quirky harmonic twists and transparent orchestration were clearly laid out to point the way to Stravinsky's future works.

There followed an appearance by a former Menuhin prize-winner, Chad Hoopes. Michael Daugherty's *Fire and Blood* (2003) is a 25-minute concerto in three movements inspired by Diego Rivera's striking *Detroit Industry Murals* (depicting work at the Ford Motor Company). 'Volcano' is lightly scored to allow the violin to come through but the accompaniment is nevertheless full of colour. 'River Rouge' (after the name of the Ford plant) makes use of a mariachi band to evoke Rivera's Mexican heritage and is also an ode to Rivera's wife Frida Kahlo with a haunting melody of eerie lyricism. 'Assembly Line' has great rhythmic life with syncopations, whooping horns, darting strings and stinging whip-cracks. Hoopes was a committed soloist of lyrical fervour, full tone and phenomenal technique. *Fire and Blood* feels like a meeting of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* and Alexander Mosolov's *The Iron Foundry* but it also felt freshly imagined. As an encore, Hoopes gave the opening movement of a Telemann Fantasia with ease and grace.

One of the problems of playing Stravinsky's complete *Firebird* ballet-score is that it is divorced from choreography and designs, for much of the music's first half can seem too similar, something avoided in the composer's three concert Suites. The problem for any conductor is to secure animated playing that balances momentum and coherence, which was mostly achieved here, with dynamism. The strings were rich and lustrous and some of the playing in gentler music was of great refinement, such as oboe and horn solos. Kristjan Järvi structured the work well and took the 'Infernal Dance' at a frenzied pace and with blistering physicality. The closing peroration was not just a massive outpouring but a climax of luminosity and emotional release.

Järvi can be an exhausting conductor to watch but he was clearly at-one with the NYO, which responded magnificently: he worked the players – and the audience – in true showman style! The encore was 'Dance of the Buffoons' from Tchaikovsky's *The Snow Maiden*, a raucous account, trumpeters on their feet and Järvi conducting the audience!

**Stravinsky 'Firebird' / Daugherty 'Fire and Blood' / Järvi / NYO
Thoroughly Good, Jon Jacob – 08/04/16**

The NYO have enhanced their already well-deserved reputation in recent years. Their concerts are a rare thing. They come with a guarantee: you will be amazed and delighted.

Stravinsky's *Fireworks* is a tough opener. Short, merciless and unforgiving. It is arguably the most demanding part of their Spring programme.

Michael Daugherty's *Fire and Blood* makes similar demands, but this work was where the band really engaged, evident by the warm and fluid relationship the musicians had formed with 21 year-old American violinist Chad Hoopes.

Daugherty's writing acknowledges the needs of the player and that of the listener, tantalising with seductive orchestrations. The NYO knew it and capitalised effortlessly. The opening of the second movement – 'River Rouge' – tickled the ear. Throughout the work there are gratifying influences from Britten's Violin Concerto. In the final analysis however, Daugherty palette is altogether richer.

The huge scale of the orchestra leant itself well for what turned out to be an organic performance of Stravinsky's *Firebird*. The band played with remarkable energy, responsiveness and honesty. Little wonder that when all 164 players stood to receive their applause, we stood too. There is something infectious about their playing. To not give an ovation would be churlish.

We should no longer marvel at the achievements of young people playing like adults. Instead, we should judge an NYO concert on the same level as a professional orchestra.

They might even be able to give us something a professional orchestra can't. The NYO aren't dulled by the pressures of everyday life. Listening to their performance isn't a compromise – the act of a smitten parent marvelling at their loved one's moment in the limelight. With the NYO we are treated to the purest form of music-making.

The NYO derives 75% of funding from trusts and foundations, individual supporters donors and friends. Tonight's concert is evidence of that considerable support. Long may it continue.