

Reviews Summer 2016



National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain: a robust defence for the importance of youth orchestras – review
BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall
The Daily Telegraph, John Allison – 5* (07/08/16)

As shown by the recent scare – now happily resolved – over funding to the European Union Youth Orchestra, these can be fragile times for our youth ensembles. Such orchestras are not a luxury, so it was good that their incalculable value was celebrated this weekend in three concerts at the BBC Proms. The centrepiece was this highly anticipated annual visit by the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, which proved a brilliantly robust defence of their part in our cultural fabric. If space was at a premium inside the Albert Hall – few orchestras enjoy quite the same level of support here, or manage to get more players on stage – the overall theme of the evening was outer space.

The concert opened with the premiere of Iris ter Schiphorst's specially commissioned *Gravitational Waves*, reflecting last year's discovery of a collision over a billion years ago between two black holes. Her sound-world (developed in conjunction with Uros Rojko) may run through a slightly predictable repertoire of cosmic effects, yet it was so tautly performed that it got the evening off to a start full of youthful energy. The choreographed actions for the orchestra, including a symbolic donning of masks, worked well on such a densely packed stage.

You could argue that the main work of the first half, Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, had only a tenuous link with space. It is a piece reflecting Nietzsche's philosophy of the universe, and only its appropriation for Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: a Space Odyssey* linked to the evening's theme.

Still, everyone likes an excuse to hear it, especially a performance as good as this one under Edward Gardner, who communicated a strong sense of the sprawling tone poem to orchestra and audience alike. Conducting with a suspenseful baton, Gardner got his young players to deliver the musical sunrise thrillingly, helped in particular by the steel-nerved organist Joseph Beadle. The NYO may not have the punch of a grown-up orchestra, but they lack nothing else and the strings caught the yearning quality of this music. The solos from the leader, Millie Ashton, soared rapturously in the Tanzlied section.

Holst's *The Planets* was perhaps the first masterpiece of British musical modernism, as Gardner and the players reminded us here. All sections of the orchestra drove this performance along with great attack and complete absence of anything routine, before coming to rest with the mercurial virtuosity of Colin Matthews's recently added *Pluto* – the dwarf planet had yet to be discovered when Holst wrote the music a century ago. Matthews's scoring dovetails with Holst's even to the extent of using wordless female voices, and this performance extended the concert's youthful theme by drawing them from the CBSO Youth Chorus. Everything added up to make this one of the NYO's best evenings.

**Proms 26, 27 and 29: BBC SO/ Knussen; BBC Scottish SO/ Dausgaard; NYO/ Gardner
at the Royal Albert Hall
The Times, Richard Morrison – 5* 08/08/16**

Prommers heard a spooky work from Reinbert de Leeuw, an atmospheric one by Helen Grime and a dazzling showpiece from Iris ter Schiphorst

Reibert de Leeuw's *Der nächtliche Wanderer* will certainly be the spookiest new piece at this year's Proms. The Dutchman takes a short Hölderlin poem and uses this fragment of 19th-century gothic macabre as a springboard for a 54-minute ghoulish fest for huge orchestra, off-stage ensemble and taped sounds. Among the latter are tolling bell, barking dog and the poem itself, intoned in spine-chilling sepulchral tones reminiscent of Hammer horror films.

De Leeuw also quotes Wagner's deathbed piano piece and a sonata by Galina Ustvolskaya. His piece moves from unease to maelstrom and back again; the use of the orchestra is flamboyant and masterly; and Oliver Knussen's direction of the BBC Symphony Orchestra did it proud – but what a nightmarish view of existence.

More eerie sonorities, weaved into a much more vibrant soundscape, came the following evening with the premier (by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Thomas Dausgaard) of the first of Helen Grime's *Two Eardley Pictures*. Inspired by the painter Joan Eardley's Scottish landscapes, this was subtitled *Catterline in Winter*, and Grime's atmospheric and sometimes even ecstatic music certainly suggested a rugged east-coast community crouched defiantly against the North Sea gales.

What followed, however, upstaged all else. It was the Proms debut of Pekka Kuusisto, the maverick Finnish violinist, improbably playing the Tchaikovsky Concerto – and doing so with such cool, almost insouciant irony that a few technical infelicities seemed irrelevant. He really is the David Bowie of the fiddle. His played-and-sung encore – a Karelian folk song dating, he quipped, from “when Russia was still part of Finland” – brought the house down.

So did the opening piece in the National Youth Orchestra's exuberant Prom under Edward Gardner. Iris ter Schiphorst's surging *Gravitational Waves* was inspired by the throb, detected last September, of two black holes colliding more than a billion years ago. She translated this into a ten-minute piece that was as much theatre – the players putting on masks, nodding, swaying and shouting with choreographic precision – as muscularly minimalist music. Both cosmic and comic, it was a dazzling showpiece for virtuoso youth.

**NYO/Gardner review – an epic odyssey through space and time
Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh
The Guardian, Rian Evans - 4* (05/08/16)**

The NYO and Edward Gardner paid homage to Einstein and the cosmos in a programme that was graceful and evocative

The National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain sets its sights high and in this programme, conceived on a cosmic scale, it took the Snape Proms audience on a space odyssey. Accepting that Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* will never shake off the associations acquired through Stanley Kubrick's film 2001 and the lunar pioneers, the NYO and conductor Edward Gardner set it alongside Gustav Holst's *The Planets*. In both works, the 160-plus forces achieved a depth and richness of sound that belied their youth. There was never such a good night to be a tuba player or a double bassist.

Out of Strauss's initial epic monumentality came grace and verve; leader Millie Ashton delivering the questing solo violin lines. Following a glowingly dynamic account of the Holst, Gardner went on to argue the strongest possible case for Colin Matthews's *Pluto*, written for the millennium. Growing out of mystic Neptune's dying notes – sung by the girls of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra youth choir – the feeling here was of an implicit and organic connection with the original suite. Moreover, the shimmering solar winds of *Pluto* took the ear back, orbit completed, to the work specially commissioned to launch the evening.

Iris ter Schiphorst's *Gravitational Waves* was inspired by new scientific research validating Einstein, and it summoned a novel and symbolic mix of visual, aural and vocal gestures. The synchrony, whereby the players first wore white or black masks, then embodied the waves of the title in perfectly choreographed movements rippling through the serried ranks, created an arresting counterpoint to the imaginative, otherworldly soundscape realised by Ter Schiphorst and co-composer Uros Rojko. Evanescent and evocative, embracing known and unknown, it captured something of the awesome history and infinity of time.

**National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain/Edward Gardner – Gravitational Waves,
Also sprach Zarathustra, The Planets plus Pluto
BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall
Classical Source, Brian Barford – (06/08/16)**

After having given one of the best concerts of the year so far, in April at the Royal Festival Hall, the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain was in London again for another well-filled programme. This time the NYO was conducted by Edward Gardner who got the players to display a different range of qualities.

Iris ter Schiphorst's *Gravitational Waves* is prompted by the recent detection of emissions set in motion over a billion years ago by the collision of two black holes. Schiphorst uses sounds from the scientific project heard through a sampler and reflected in the orchestra as well as a broadcast narrative. The soaring brass, scurrying strings and metallic percussion offer a sense of infinity. There is also a strong sense of visual performance, for the musicians don masks, sway in unison, make vocal interjections, and at the end raise their arms in a gesture of hope for the future. It proved an arresting piece to see and one imagines it was enjoyable to present.

Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra* is a problematic work to bring off convincingly. The Nietzsche element can be unattractive although one should remember that Strauss subverts the text at the conclusion where nature not metaphysical inspiration has the last word and the piece ends with a question mark. Also, following the now-famous '2001' opening *Zarathustra* is a free-form fantasia that can seem meandering.

Gardner and the NYO welded all of the sections into a convincing whole. The horizon-searching opening was delivered in ringing style, underpinned by the Royal Albert Hall organ at its most sonorous. The music for solo strings was played with feeling and the players made up for what they may have lacked in opulence with real ardour and intensity. There were thrusting horns in the 'expression of joys and passions'. The Viennese waltz was elegant with a fine violin solo from Millie Ashton and the Midnight Bell episode was given a tremendous dark intensity and the eerily ambiguous close beautifully rendered. Overall, this was a well-paced account delivered with thrilling virtuosity.

Gustav Holst's *The Planets* suits the Albert Hall and is tailor-made for the NYO. Gardner delivered a brisk reading, well-balanced and vividly detailed. 'Mars' was ominous and brutal with strings digging deep, belligerent brass and emphatic timpani. With 'Venus' Gardner emphasised Holst's debt to French music, warm and luscious, then 'Mercury' was fleet, harps highlighted. 'Jupiter' was brisk and buoyant and the famous hymn-tune had nobility. 'Saturn' was given the ideal mixture of mystery and solemn processional whilst 'Uranus' had jauntiness rising to demonic possession. The sheer strangeness of the superbly played woodwind solos in 'Neptune' raised links with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and the disembodied harmonies blended inexorably with the mystic echo of the unseen women's voices.

I'm agnostic about the addition of Colin Matthews's *Pluto the Renewer* (dedicated to Imogen Holst) given the music, while adventurous, is out of harmony with the rest of the work, but it nevertheless rose to a splendid, focussed climax delivered with great conviction. At the close the impression is of 'Neptune' returning, tantalisingly so, with the come-again of the chorus.

Prom 29: National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain provide an evening of stellar entertainment
Bachtrack, Penny Homer – 4* (07/08/16)

During Saturday night's Prom at the Royal Albert Hall, I had to keep reminding myself that the eldest member of the orchestra I was watching was just twenty years old and a good many of the rest were born in this millennium, such was the assured confidence of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. These young players showed an adult understanding of all that was set before them married to a youthful exuberance excellently guided by Edward Gardner's baton.

The three works of the evening were loosely linked by a theme of outer space, immediately evident in Iris ter Schiphorst's *Gravitational Waves*. As the title suggests, the soundworld (created in collaboration with Uroš Rojko) was inspired by last year's detection of gravitational waves from the collision of two black holes. Merging live and recorded elements with choreography and spoken word made the case for concert as theatre; in black and white masks the orchestra were clearly enjoying themselves evoking the deep rumble of outer space. The only jarring moments came from the pre-recorded voiceovers of explanation, which seemed fussy, the work speaking for itself well-enough without them, building up from deep rumblings into a dance, representing the two black holes coming together in destruction, before ebbing away into nothingness.

Also Sprach Zarathustra's exploration is perhaps more philosophical than astronomical, though its now indelible link with *2001: A Space Odyssey* makes its inclusion understandable. The opening brass and organ were excellent, though the strings lacked the same punch to make the sunrise truly radiant. Elsewhere, however, they were rich and warm, Gardner teasing high Romanticism out of them as well as pitch perfect hunting and pastoral scenes. I was also much more aware of the regular recurrence of the "sunrise" 5ths

throughout the performance, harking back to the dawn of man and all its potential even in the midst of turmoil. There were some wonderful solo outings from all sections, and the combined forces of the orchestra (which were numerous) were staggeringly impressive at the climatic revelation of the midnight bells.

Holst's *The Planets* is now so familiar that it is hard to imagine it as a modernist work in the early 20th Century; watching an orchestra of youngsters tackle it was a timely reminder of how fresh it can be. *Mars* and *Mercury* were driven, although at times the fire dimmed ever so slightly in the opening movement. Venus proved to be the only disappointment of the evening, lacking in delicacy. Perhaps this was because I was expecting a more lush interpretation from Gardner, but it felt a little paint-by-numbers.

More impressive, however, was their handling of the outer planets, whose mature themes might have been beyond such young players. Not so; *Saturn, the bringer of Old Age* proved the best of all the movements. From its haunting start, the slow march towards death felt visceral and personal – I felt the weight of each passing second. *Jupiter* was also excellent; driving forward to what we now know as *I Vow To Thee My Country*, full of warmth and power. *Uranus* is the movement that I have in the past struggled to recall its identity – no more after the freshness brought to it here, its rousing climax quickly contrasted with a taut subito p to end. *Neptune* showed that the delicacy lacking in Venus was not beyond the orchestra, and was utterly transfixing. This delicacy extended to the balance with the off-stage voices of the CBSO Youth Chorus, giving them enough space to emerge. For such a seemingly small involvement, *Neptune* is a surprisingly tough ask for the voices, coming in high and quiet after a long period of silence. These difficulties weren't quite surmounted and at times the tuning was a little unsettled, but the fade out was perfectly judged.

In his programme note for *Pluto, the Renewer*, Colin Matthews remarks that its dedicatee, Holst's daughter Imogen, "would have been both amused and dismayed by this venture". It was probably a sentiment that continues to be shared by many – after the beautiful fade out of *Neptune*, what could possibly come next? And yet if such a venture had to be undertaken, thankfully it was done in great style, breaking out before *Neptune* had fully died away. For the most part Matthews provided a thorough re-working of all the ideas in each movement while never veering into pastiche. The only awkward moments were the Mars motives, which jarred, although the orchestra attacked it all gamely, and the CBSO Youth Chorus voices were more confident with their involvement here. An interesting exercise, and fortunately not one detracting from Holst's vision, or the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain's brilliance. I expect bright futures for many of them

National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain / Gardner @ Royal Albert Hall, London
Music OMH, Barry Creasy – 4.5* (06/08/16)

Saturday night's space-themed Prom with Edward Gardner and the National Youth Orchestra required only the presence of the ubiquitous Professor Brian Cox to add icing to its cake, and it is surprising that his voice was not used in the recorded speech soundtrack to Iris ter Schiphorst's commissioned work '*Gravitational Waves*,' which must have been hugely enjoyable to perform, as it required the orchestra to sway, to shout, and to don carnival masks. Musically, it was the love-child of Murray Gold and György Ligeti: a filmic eight-minute exposition of orchestral timbres – amplified scratched gongs, breathed-into brass instruments, overlapping woodwind glissandi, massive Dr Phibes organ chords, and even a comic Zebedee spring effect – all of which the orchestra took in its stride, giving the piece an assured first performance.

One of the delights of NYO performances is that, because the players are not salaried, the orchestra can field as many as will fit on the stage, and nine trumpets punching out the

opening arpeggio of surely the most famous 21 bars of space-associated music (the beginning of Richard Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*) was an electrifying moment. The rich passage for low strings continued the delight with a more mellow ambience, followed by the perfect entry of the very Straussian horns. The dynamic throughout was well controlled, and the occasional violin duets were as late-romantic as they needed to be. The performance was quite a brisk one, and it would have perhaps made for more enjoyment if some of the steamier passages had been lingered over a little more, but this is a minor quibble. The 'science fugue' was properly rigid, but Strauss's sumptuous 'dance song' waltz took a little while to find its feet. Overall, though, it was a good performance that a professional orchestra would have been proud to turn in.

There was no let-up in the intensity after the interval, as the orchestra embarked on the inexorable five-four-time representation of modern warfare, 'Mars,' the opening of Holst's *The Planets*. Although the massive brass section and full organ certainly pinned the audience to their seats, the moments of quiet menace were also well observed. Indeed, Gardner and the orchestra pulled off extremely well Holst's brilliantly varied and descriptive scoring of the entire suite. The cool, almost sylvan, charm of the in-reality-arid 'Venus' was adroitly portrayed through the well-controlled strings and woodwind, and the quixotic three-against-two that characterizes the opening of 'Mercury' skipped cheerfully along. The tempo of 'Jupiter' was again perhaps a little lively for some (and it caused a tiny hiatus in the timpani at one point), but the main theme broadened out magnificently. The most stunning performance of the evening was for 'Saturn' – the implacable ticking of the clock of life in the harps and flutes was truly chilling, and the brass funeral dirge over the warm pizzicato of the low strings was a magical moment. 'Uranus' was busily accomplished (with an impressive shout from full organ), but the quietly rarefied timbres of 'Neptune' seemed to flummox the orchestra slightly, and there were some pitching problems, although the off-stage choir (the women of the CBSO Youth Chorus) from the gallery, finished the piece perfectly.

Colin Matthews' 2000 addition to the suite – '*Pluto, the Renewer*' – is an ethereal jumble of sounds: plenty of rumbling basses and tinkling glockenspiels that picks up where Neptune left off. The orchestration echoes that of Holst, but somehow a clear theme of its own never quite emerges, and the sense is more of replication than renewal. The performance was excellent, but it still felt like more of an add-on than a true completion.

NYO, Symphony Hall: Irish ter Schiphorst, Richard Strauss and Gustav Holst
5:4, Simon Cummings – 06/08/16

i had many reasons for wanting to hear last night's National Youth Orchestra concert at Symphony Hall in Birmingham, not least of which was simply to hear NYO in action again. They are an astonishing orchestra, not merely able but mature, sensitive and abounding in talent; their rendition of Messiaen's *Turangalila-Symphonie* a few years back is a particularly vibrant memory. Beyond this, i was intrigued to hear more music by German composer Iris ter Schiphorst, whose *Aus Liebe* had been one of the most striking works at the Arditti Quartet's HCMF concert last year. But most of all, i wanted to hear Richard Strauss' *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, a work i've known intimately since my teenage years but which i've never, until yesterday, had the opportunity to hear performed live.

There's something very strange about this; the rest of Strauss' tone poems enjoy regular performances in the UK, both at national and local level (particularly *Ein Heldenleben*, *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Don Juan*), but trying to find a performance of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* is almost impossible. In this respect, it's completely the opposite of the other major work included in last night's concert, Holst's *The Planets*, a work so ubiquitous in the UK that it borders on the absurd. Hearing the Strauss and Holst in close proximity (a superb bit of concert programming) only makes the absence of *Also Sprach* in British concert halls all the

more unfathomable. They have a lot in common, after all. Instrumentally, both use a large orchestra, including an organ. I used to wonder whether it was the presence of the organ that put off orchestras from performing the Strauss, but the prevalence of the Holst in concert halls rules this out. Both works, too, are especially renowned for their openings: Strauss, due to the use of the Introduction in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and Holst due to *Mars, the Bringer of War* being one of the most arrestingly immediate bits of orchestral music you'll ever hear. Strauss' Introduction, in fact, often pops up all by itself, usually in concerts of film music, so technically speaking, 100 seconds of the 35-minute work do actually get heard in the UK fairly regularly. But the 33 minutes of music that follow are among the finest Richard Strauss ever composed, and that really is saying something. I'll actually nail my colours to the wall and say that, in my view, *Also Sprach* outclasses all of Strauss' other tone poems, in terms of its breadth of imagination, dramatic range, narrative complexity, as well as its overwhelming lyrical scope and simply astonishing beauty. Another point of connection with the Holst is its drawing on imagery that reflects back on humanity's character and nature. In Holst's case, perhaps somewhat embarrassingly in hindsight, the inspiration is astrological, exploring the laughably arbitrary qualities supposedly imbued on the psyche due to the influence of the planets. Strauss turned to something altogether more lofty, Friedrich Nietzsche's novel of the same name, a work that, among other things, looks to the possibility of humanity transcending itself, turning away from other-worldly religious myths towards a reclamation of earth and body, thereby becoming an übermensch. Maybe herein lies the reason for Strauss' masterpiece being so neglected: people can get to grips with the noble idea of a hero's life, the concepts of death and transfiguration, or enjoy the larking about of figures like *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Don Juan* and *Don Quixote*; but ask them to engage with the demanding philosophical humanist manifesto of Nietzsche, and perhaps inevitably heads are swiftly going to be scratched.

So NYO's decision to tackle this great masterwork is therefore unusual, courageous and of huge benefit to audiences, the majority of whom, if they know anything of it beyond the first 100 seconds, will likely only have heard it on disc (apropos: Karajan's 1983 digital recording is by far the best; ignore anyone claiming his 1973 version is superior – *Also Sprach* should never sound so polite as it does there, the '83 recording fully embraces and realises the extremes of the score). Conductor Edward Gardner coaxed from them precisely what the work needs above all else: a supremely cogent musical argument where the assortment of component parts feel both fundamentally interconnected and part of a complex, slowly unfolding discourse. The more I hear Gardner in action, the more I appreciate the way he makes tempo melt in his hands, handling the elastic results in such a way that entirely new life and new details emerge. You'd think it wasn't possible to do anything new with the Introduction, but the marked, measured delivery of the famous fanfare motif was surprising and made it all the more exciting. Just like Mahler, Strauss' use of very large forces is deceptive, rarely allowed to let rip, favouring instead extended use of small numbers of players, and these were among the finest moments of the entire evening. The front string desks, in particular, were utterly superb, turning the slow-burning build-up of '*Von den Hinterweltlern*', the sinewy counterpoint of '*Das Grablied*' and the playful imitations partway through '*Der Genesende*' into sublime episodes of chamber music, showing off just how able these musicians are in such exposed passages as these, and leader Millie Ashton deserves unqualified high praise for her gorgeous, note-perfect performance of the '*Das Tanzlied*' solo.

The multitude of climaxes were impressive in the way they maintained clarity even in the most devastatingly full-throttle outbursts; nothing can prepare one for the eruption in '*Der Genesende*' that threatens to rend the entire piece in two (one of the most violent tuttis in the history of orchestral music; Karajan's 1983 version is beyond terrifying); even here, when one got the impression every single member of the orchestra wanted to punch the audience in the face, there was a lot more going on than a mere impulse towards blunt force trauma: clarity, purpose, persuasion. And courage, Gardner pausing dangerously long after this tutti,

prompting some nervous wonderings whether someone might clap, thinking, 15 minutes early, that the end had come. It was a risk worth taking, one of innumerable throughout the performance; despite my long-term knowledge and understanding of Strauss' score, new elements, details, moments of passing filigree, flashes of instrumentational sympathy and friction kept occurring, making the piece sound as new and strange as it must have sounded at its first performance 120 years ago. And while NYO very occasionally struggled (the opening of the '*Von der Wissenschaft*' fugue is an intonational and rhythmic nightmare), what they conveyed above all was a cohesive demonstration of the utmost unity and dramatic conviction. In them, Richard Strauss found an overwhelmingly keen ambassador.

Their performance of the Holst was equally impressive in its fidelity, but i couldn't help wondering to what extent the piece is still able to speak when it's become so over-familiar. (Admittedly, it's partly me: after all, i'm from the same town as Holst (Cheltenham) and have therefore probably heard *The Planets* more in my life than anyone reasonably should.) Don't get me wrong, there's much about it i deeply admire, chiefly *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*, easily the most impressive movement of the entire sequence, which on this occasion exhibited a glorious, growing sense of grandeur and majesty. And Gardner's elastic approach to the score was at times revelatory, as in the mid-point through Mars, following the first climax, when he slowed the tempo so much that it suddenly took on an altogether unexpected level of ominous menace, and even in Jupiter, pulling around the tempi such that the hotchpotch of ideas became active ingredients in a white-hot crucible. The work's conclusion, which has some foreshadowing during the latter parts of Saturn, was spine-tingling, and although the members of the CBSO Youth Chorus lost their grip on the notes a few times, it was a convincingly moving progression from semi-stillness into the infinite. Until, that is, Colin Matthews' execrable *Pluto* appeared as it does with such banal regularity these days, like a half-drunk gatecrasher turning up at a party just as everyone's leaving, who then proceeds to piss himself in the hallway before passing out. This specimen of pastiche texture trash may be brief, but it never fails to destroy utterly the sublime narrative arch and dramatic culmination of Holst's Planets, one of the most glaring missteps in new music of the last twenty years.

Iris ter Schiphorst's new work *Gravitational Waves* opened the concert, and it established a further aesthetic link between all three pieces. Strauss' music, particularly his approach to melody and orchestration, finds a familiar in the work of film composer John Williams, nowhere more so than his *Star Wars* scores. Holst's Planets has infiltrated other areas of sci-fi, particularly *Star Trek*, establishing a very specific type of soundworld for suggesting space that continues today. And then there's Hans Zimmer. Unfortunately, *Gravitational Waves* frequently brought to mind the aggressive, blank overkill of Zimmer's horrible *Interstellar* score (arguably the nadir of his career). My hopes were high following the subtle effectiveness of last year's *Aus Liebe*, but really none of that was anywhere to be found here, ter Schiphorst instead relying on familiar orchestral tropes to suggest dark primordiality, and including theatrical elements (the orchestra donned black and white masks, dividing them into a visual representation of the two black holes explored in the work) that lacked a convincing sonic parallel. Very disappointing.

The entire programme will be performed again at tonight's Prom concert, and while you can take or leave *Gravitational Waves* and even *The Planets*, i want to implore everyone everywhere to give 35 minutes of your time for *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, one of the greatest of all orchestral scores, and an incomprehensible rarity in our concert halls. Perhaps on the strength of NYO's wonderful interpretation, it might finally experience a belated, well-deserved renaissance.

Prom 29: NYO, Gardner/Prom 30: Kolesnikov, NYOS, Volkov
Best of British youth blaze, with gold going to a London-based Siberian pianist

BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall
The Arts Desk, David Nice – 4* (08/08/16)

If the BBC were to plan a Proms season exclusively devoted to youth orchestras and ensembles, many of us would be delighted. Standards are now at professional level right across the board. 20 years ago, the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland (★★★★★) couldn't compare with its Great British counterpart; now, although the age ranges are slightly different and the (or should that be *the*) National Youth Orchestra (★★★★★) has vast wind and brass sections, playing levels appeared equal. It was only the matter of a conductor's questionable interpretation in the first concert and a superlative soloist in the second which gave the overall palm to the Scottish team.

Let's get the major disappointment out of the way first. This was another mixed bag for Edward Gardner with the NYO following their razor-sharp Stravinsky *Petrushka* and comparatively blurred Lutosławski *Concerto for Orchestra* at the 2014 Proms. Gardner simply didn't seem to know what to do with Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, part of an interplanetary programme courtesy of what Stanley Kubrick made of its first minute in *2001: A Space Odyssey* rather than anything galactic in the composer's poetic homage to Nietzsche.

Nevertheless it struck me for the first time that the Holst of *The Planets*, featured here in the NYO's second half, may have known his Strauss, not least in some of the low wind colours, the punctuating use of the organ (the Albert Hall leviathan played here by 14-year-old Joseph Beadle) and the final incandescence. Quite why Gardner was able to encourage space and magic in 'Venus, the Bringer of Peace' and grandly conceived terror in 'Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age' when he found none in what should have been the big billowings, the joys, passions and *Night Wanderer's Song*, of the wacky 1895 tone poem baffles me. Gardner's Zarathustra was over-driven throughout, only occasionally startling as the 12 silky double-basses launched the famous fugue based on all 12 notes of the chromatic scale (one of the first tone rows, in short, though Bach and Mozart have them, too). Jonathan Nott made it all fly with another young team at the Proms, the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra; by comparison, this was an interpretative black hole.

Gardner did, on the other hand, seem to love and understand his Holst. The very distinct character of each planetary humour reached two dancing zeniths in an incomparably brilliant 'Jupiter' and the terrifying romp of 'Uranus'. Colin Matthews's otiose addition of a Pluto piece - that planet was only discovered four years before Holst's death - offers nothing new, soundwise, and lacks the thematic hooks of the master. It did only one service here: to move us on from some dodgy tuning in the final wordless chorus, always a treat wafting down from the Albert Hall Gallery but treacherously high and probably not suited for young ones such as the CBSO Youth Chorus. Inchoate, too, was the opener, Iris ter Schiphorst's *Gravitational Waves*, fun though it must have been for the players to don black and white masks, for the strings to be amplified, and educational for us to contemplate a piece based around the 'chirp' sound emitted by the circling of two giant black holes. Loud at times, yes; cosmic, no.

Soundworld wise, we heard nothing new in the second of Helen Grime's *Two Eardley Pictures - Snow* - at the start of the NYOS concert. I love the paintings and their originality, but it's hard to detect any poetic links in music that's percussion-spangled and twittery like a hundred other new pieces. Its virtues, apart from the clearly well prepared performance with its strong rhythmic undertow, are Grime's characteristic concision and the moody two - and three-part string writing which, if anything, is at the core of the work.

This was as vivid an interpretation of Stravinsky's complete *Firebird* ballet as we're ever likely to hear in the Albert Hall. Not as quirky, perhaps, as Kristjan Järvi's unpredictable

flaming with the NYO at the Festival Hall earlier this year, but Volkov knows exactly how to keep the first half from exotic torpor, and there were some wonderful orchestral solos along the way, with the first horn a match for her counterpart in the NYO the previous evening. And it's a big claim, but I've never heard a principal flautist in any orchestra more full-toned and agile than Graham Dickson, making his mark earlier in the Tchaikovsky Second Piano Concerto. This was a revelation shared between Volkov, who stripped away any imperial grandeur in favour of bright energy, and his astonishing pianist, 27-year-old Pavel Kolesnikov.

Kolesnikov can do everything this colossal masterpiece requires - the thunder and the double octaves, the flyaway transcendentalism, but above all the imaginative poetry which made his two huge cadenzas in the first movement coruscate with unique ebb and flow. He rightly kept a low profile in the one-off slow movement. Its extensive solo roles for violin and cello used to be cruelly cut in the pointless abbreviation of selfish piano virtuoso Alexander Ziloti, but their final trio-union with the pianist is worth waiting for, and here came out of a central section of genuine threat and distress. Here Ye Ye Xu and Findlay Spence were rightly in the limelight; I'm sure NYO leader Millie Ashton was equally good in her important solos the previous evening, but from my seat, and given an extra desk of first violins, she was turned too far away to register.

Tchaikovsky's adorable finale was taken at a daring lick, but Kolesnikov dropped no stitches and managed the chuckles as well as the heartsurges with perfect clarity. His encore took us from G major to G minor, and a poignant lowering of temperatures if not emotional content, the rising scales of 'June' from Tchaikovsky's *The Seasons*. Full tone and distant voices alternated with perfect instinct, setting the seal on a young pianist who is already one of the best in the world. And his concerto performance blazed such a trail that it left Tchaikovsky Competition winner Dmitry Masleev in the First Concerto earlier this summer stranded in the dust. Trifonov and company need to make a place for Kolesnikov in their august company; he's more than ready.

NYO plays Holst's Planet Suite
BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall
Thoroughly Good, Jon Jacob – (07/08/16)

I feel like the Proms is distant, perhaps almost forgotten about.

Hardly surprising. Last weekend's trip to Verbier was enlightening. It enriched too. I saw breath-taking chamber and orchestral performances. That combined with the blissful sense of detachment the mountainside location promotes, made the Royal Albert Hall feel like it was a world away.

I reconnected with the Proms via the NYO's performance of Holst's Planet Suite last night. The concert was streamed live via BBC iPlayer, something I really hope there will be more of in future. I really value the idea that iPlayer is a channel which supports a variety of different interests by virtue of it not being driven by the tyranny of linear TV schedules. Knowing, for example, that I can tap into a live orchestral concert via the internet without paying a subscription is, in actual fact, something of a special feeling.

But that indulgence came at an unexpected price last night. Aside from my ongoing disenchantment with Holst's most famous orchestral piece – its fast becoming wallpaper in my eyes – seeing presenters Clemency Burton-Hill and Lloyd Coleman in front of the cameras at the end of proceedings reminded me of something I've slowly come to realise about the classical music world, something of a personal failure in fact.

I can say this now. I couldn't say it ten years ago. But, I really have no problem admitting it now. If there was a goal at the BBC when I started there in 2005, it was that I wanted to be a presenter. I participated in all sorts of schemes, did a handful of auditions, and sidled up to those who I thought might advocate on my behalf. I reckoned there would at some point be a call from someone saying, 'Do you fancy doing a spot of presenting? We reckon you'd be good.'

It never happened. And looking back, I think I know why. I had left it too late before specialising in my chosen field. I've left it too late now in some respects. My music degree, although still a recent memory, was something I was awarded in 1994. Whilst my passion and knowledge for classical music may seem obvious to me, it's not for those outside of my cloudy self-indulgent bubble.

I went through a phase of down-playing my knowledge – around about the time I started blogging – thinking that was the secret to cajoling newcomers to the concert hall. And that if the likes of the Proms wanted to appear more accessible, then maybe a self-deprecating presenter poking gentle fun at the sometime pomposity of the classical music world would be what was required. It wasn't until a professional music playing friend who I'd studied with pointed out that I was doing myself and my studies down by doing so, that I began to have second thoughts and then abandon all of my child-like dreams. Fool.

Of course, if I was to say that my aspirations to be a classical music presenter on radio or TV never materialised because of that ill-judged strategy would be a little self-absorbed, even for me. It's possible, that I didn't display any of the attributes necessary: articulacy, a willingness to read a script or be a team player, or a demonstrable track record of professional music making, journalism, or at the very least, knowledge.

Now I reflect on that missed goal, I realise it's still there. Perhaps the need to fulfil it has subsided somewhat. Maybe a healthy dose of realism has been injected into my thinking too: just because I think it's a good idea, doesn't necessarily mean everyone else does.

What I realise now is that the thing I used to feel rather embarrassed about admitting – 'I'd like to do that job' – is not something to be embarrassed but a statement of how proud I feel of the thing which derives me so much pleasure and has done long after I stopped playing. It's not that I want to be on television. I realise now that I want to be associated with the likes of the Proms in some way. I still see a place for someone like me. I see room for an 'audience rep', mediating for those who are sometimes mystified by the etiquette and legacy of the genre.

Such is the effect a Youth Orchestra Prom concert can have. All of the performers in the NYO were born after I graduated from university. They are the ones who made it, the ones who had the talent, the ones who worked the hardest, and the ones who secured the place they richly deserved. One should never regret, of course. But as each year passes I look on an NYO Prom and wonder whether I could have worked a little bit harder a little earlier on. Maybe it wouldn't feel quite so much like I was running to catch-up.

It was the end of proceedings live on BBC iPlayer which really hit home. 'Great music,' says Lloyd, 'and great company. Thank you very much for having me Clemmie.' 'Are you kidding?' says Clemency Burton-Hill turning to Lloyd, 'you were fantastic.' It's a little cheesy, but it's heartfelt. I should have played the game. Should have done my time. Should have displayed a modicum of talent earlier on.

It's only the day after when I go searching the internet for 'Lloyd Coleman musician' that I discover something else. That like me, Lloyd is a clarinettist. He's interested in broadcasting,

produces his own show. The fundamental difference is that he's a former member of the NYO, still a musician and now a composer.

I should have worked harder.