

FINANCIAL TIMES

Royal Concertgebouw/ Rostropovich

Royal Festival Hall, London SE1

RICHARD FAIRMAN

It is not often that the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra is caught on tour without its chief conductor: Riccardo Chailly is working out his notice and Mariss Jansons, does not start until next year.

For Sunday afternoon's concert at the Royal Festival Hall the guest conductor was Mstislav Rostropovich, wonderfully inspiring, wonderfully disorganised as ever. But who cares, when here is a great musician for whom any orchestra would want to give its best?

Rostropovich brought an all-Russian programme, thoughtfully balanced. The Prelude to Act One and "Dance of the Persian Maidens" from Musorgsky's *Khovanshchina* introduced Rostropovich's typically generous way with his native Russian music – lots of atmosphere, expansive speeds and rich textures. They did well to get this bloom in the hall's unfriendly acoustic.

Rostropovich used to perform Musorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death* with his wife, Galina Vishnevskaya, whose blazing singing was just about enough to wake the dead. Olga Borodina is a mezzo-soprano and a very different kind of singer, grand and expansive, but her performance of these portentous songs was barely less impressive. This is one of the exceptional voices of today.

The cycle was performed in the now customary orchestration by Shostakovich, a neat bridge to his Fifth Symphony after the interval. How personal Rostropovich makes this music. The second movement bumped along with quirky stops and starts. In the slow movement Rostropovich was all unfettered emotion, as though tapping into the shared heartbeat of a great communal suffering. The orchestra played wholeheartedly for him.

★★★★★