

Classical

**RCO/
Rostropovich**

Royal Festival Hall, London

★★★★☆

Now in his late 70s, Mstislav Rostropovich seems to be looking back on his remarkable career with the mellowness that often comes from hindsight. His programmes now focus on works and composers with which he had a close association, whether private or creative. For his guest appearance with Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, he opted for Shostakovich, placing the Fifth Symphony alongside the orchestral

version of Mussorgsky's Songs and Dances of Death that Shostakovich prepared for Rostropovich's wife, the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya.

Vishnevskaya has long since retired, though her frightening performances on the cycle linger in the memory. Rostropovich, refusing to replicate them, is now working with the mezzo Olga Borodina, a singer who, to some extent, is the antithesis of his wife. Vishnevskaya, steely in tone, was one of the 20th century's great vocal actresses. Borodina has one of the most glorious voices of our time, but is more restrained and less interventionist, Rostropovich accordingly now shading the tone away from terror

towards elegy. Death, omnipresent and stalking the world in multiple guises, is now approached with resignation rather than fear. Borodina is disturbingly sexy in the Serenade, her voice rolling through the phrases with opulent abandon. Rostropovich is at his best in the Trepak, where the heaving eddies of orchestral sound mirror the movement of the snowdrifts in which the drunken peasant will eventually die.

Rostropovich's interpretation of Shostakovich's Fifth is one with which UK audiences are already familiar, though this too has undergone a few shifts in emphasis. The conductor has always presented the work as subversive, and now the

overall mood has darkened. His speeds have become slower, and the Scherzo seems oppressed and lumbering rather than defiant. The slow movement is more meditative, and the finale heaves itself out of exhaustion towards a lacklustre triumph, its solemnity undercut by the excruciating string and wind monotone that rhythmically jabs away above it.

Rostropovich does not quite have the same rapport with the RCO, however, that he has with other orchestras. The curtain-raiser consisted of the Prelude and Ballet Music from Mussorgsky's Khovanshchina, marred by some sluggish speeds and indifferent playing. There were a couple of moments in

the Songs and Dances of Death where the ensemble seemed precarious, and it was not until the symphony that the orchestra struck form.

Tim Ashley