



*'The piece fuses the tangy intonations of Chinese melody with the sort of rhythmic pizzazz associated with Leonard Bernstein'*

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'To coincide with the opening ceremonies in Beijing, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra began last night's concert with *Olympic Fire*, a new BBC commission from Chen Yi, the Chinese composer. It might not have been on such a spectacular scale as the festivities in Bird's Nest stadium, but the 15 minutes of music were full of energy, pyrotechnics, muscle and athletic feats.

The piece fuses the tangy intonations of Chinese melody with the sort of rhythmic pizzazz associated with Leonard Bernstein, with bright timbres, plenty of percussion and a wild cadenza for the timpani that intensifies the momentum and fuels the general mood of tireless exuberance.

It certainly gave the RPO and conductor Leonard Slatkin the chance for a workout before Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, and their limbering up paid dividends in the clarity of orchestral texture and the shafts of colour that shone through.

The soloist, Olga Kern, brought freshness to the deft piano writing, while perhaps over-egging the lyricism of the famous 18th variation and putting the pianistic equivalent of a big exclamation mark over Rachmaninov's witty, throw-away ending. But it was a lively, kaleidoscopic and cohesive interpretation, amply reflecting the spry inventiveness of the music itself.

After the interval, there were two contrasting faces of Vaughan Williams. *Five Variants of 'Dives and Lazarus'* testified both to his love of folk song and also to his sensitivity in crafting such a glorious, rich score, eloquently voiced and poignant in its use of evocative instrumental sonority.

The *Sixth Symphony*, on the other hand, spoke of something much more troubled. Composed in the 1940s, this is ominous music, of which one of Vaughan Williams's admirers, the American conductor Leopold Stokowski, wrote at the time that it was 'a tonal picture of today, expressing the turmoil, the dark despair, the aspiration of an ideal future'. He also asserted that the epilogue was 'one of the most profound expressions in all music'.

These were qualities that came across potently in this performance, its intense mood sustained through surges of anguish, shivers of apprehension and, at the close, searching introspection.'