

Opera on the fringe

Roald Dahl's Cinderella

London Schools Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican Hall, April 28.

Roald Dahl has often been hailed as the greatest children's writer of all time, and with the inspired music of Vladimir Tarnopolski, Dahl's version of the fairy tale entered a new genre. *Cinderella* was performed on a mammoth scale, with the LSSO being joined by an orchestra and chorus assembled from the network of Junior Youth Centres for Young Musicians, which are spread across the capital. Heading this mass of children were six 'soloists' whose roles were not specifically musical (the rap notwithstanding, though more of that later) but were more pantomimic in style.

Tarnopolski's setting is as well-tuned to the needs and tastes of children as the original text. The music is constructed from a well-developed set of motives, some based solely on rhythm, others defined by orchestration. The most successful were the rhythmic ones, which formed complex cross rhythms with various portions of the text. These ranged from the concise 'Tell us!' from the opening ensemble to the more complex chorus of 'Pooh! Pooh! Stinky Pooh! What a stinky, smelly shoe!' The most spectacular use of this device formed the foundation of the finale, which involved every group of performers, including the orchestras, actors and chorus, chanting about the delights of jam. Superficial and childish as this may appear to those who have not yet discovered the joys of Roald Dahl (I know you're out there), it was one of many musical attributes that formed part of this resounding success. Tarnopolski has not created another *Peter and the Wolf* (wonderful though that is); *Cinderella* is even more Russian in style, with the dramatic clarity of *The Soldier's Tale* and even perhaps the choric detachment of *Oedipus Rex*.

The actors resembled standard pantomime figures, with bewigged Ugly Sisters (Harry Nicoll and Stephen Critchlow in drag), a more mature prince (Osmund Bullock), and a Storyteller (Niall Buggy) who looked as though he'd stepped out of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in his bright blue top-hat and full-length coat. The best-prepared were the truly grotesque Ugly Sisters and the highly entertaining Storyteller, whose clear diction was particularly crucial to the success of the Prologue. However, the Prince suffered from an attachment to the score which was very disappointing at times, especially in his otherwise brave attempt to rap. Geraldine James excelled as the Fairy Godmother, who owed much to Dame Edna Everage, and Louise Collins was also convincing as a less-than-traditional Cinderella.

Tarnopolski's work is a welcome addition to 'youth' repertoire, especially as it doesn't necessarily require the massed forces of this premiere. However, with its rich textures, accomplished orchestration and harmonic substance, it is a work that has huge appeal for adults. The leadership of the conductor, Peter Ash, was superlative throughout, managing to encompass all the differing ability levels of the performers under his direction. My one regret is that this was the only performance scheduled; however, I am sure it won't be the last.