
Once Upon a Time by Halle Youth Ensembles



Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) March 2016

I journeyed yesterday afternoon to the rather functional and un-predisposing building called The Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, home of the world famous Halle Orchestra. Once inside the building however, the atmosphere was one of warmth and friendliness. All the staff I spoke to were lovely and happy to help, and, what was wonderful to see too was the number of younger audience members, even children. Despite the concert being given by all the youth branches of The Halle, it was a lovely sign to say that there is a future for classical music!

The Halle have four youth branches, and in this concert each branch was given their own particular moment in the spotlight. For the opening piece, Vaughan Williams' 'Serenade To Music', the **Halle Youth Orchestra** accompanied the **Halle Youth Choir**.

The Halle Youth Choir was established in 2003 and is now recognised as one of the leading mixed voice youth choirs in the country and they have good reason to be proud of this tribute. All the singers are aged between 13 and 19 and are under the expert guidance of choirmaster Richard Wilberforce. They have a varied repertoire and seemingly go from strength to strength.

In this concert, their rendition of the choral arrangement of the Serenade was just magical. Listening to the orchestra playing the typical Vaughan Williams harmonic and melodic structures underneath such a mellifluous sound, observing the swells and diminuendos just perfectly was a wonderful experience. The balance between orchestra and chorus just right, and the diction of the choir was impeccable. I could hear and understand every word.

The Youth Choir had the boys in black open-necked shirts and the girls in bright red blouses. The open necks looked a bit casual for the occasion and music, especially when pitted against the smart red of the girls. Such a pity that our visual senses did not match our aural.

Before the interval the spotlight was then turned on to the Youth Orchestra. If I hadn't known they were youths - again all aged between 13 and 19 - then I would have simply believed them to be the real deal, their playing was so mature and professional. They played the Vaughan Williams so perfectly, and now they were on their own and doing justice to another style of composer completely. This time it was Sergei Prokofiev, and they played 9 movements from his orchestral suites of 'Romeo And Juliet'.

With Prokofiev one is never really sure whether he is a composer of fun music to be taken seriously or serious music to be taken in fun, such is his fondness for hat-nodding all the time to the styles and preferences of the classical composers who have gone before him, but always bringing his own discordant and jocular nuance to the music which makes the work undeniably fun, and instantly recognisable as his.

Jamie Phillips, the youth orchestra conductor, despite his own tender years, is already Associate conductor for the Halle and a Los Angeles Philharmonic Dudanel fellow. It is easy to understand why. His authoritative control on the podium was both relaxed and secure, but making sure every instrument, every player, was watching him and working as one. He was very much involved with the whole piece, exacting the correct dynamic from each instrument, and brought out every last ounce of imagery from the music over the auditorium and into our ears and minds. What a beautiful and plaintive final few notes as the orchestra diminuendos to silence.

After the interval, and the stage had been completely cleared except for the piano. It was now the turn of the third of the youth groups to shine, and so on walked the **Halle Youth Training Choir**. Again dressed in the black for boys and red for girls, but this time seeming a little more disciplined as they stood in three lines on the stage, awaiting their choral director, the rather enigmatic and theatrical **Stuart Overington**. These singers are only slightly younger, with an age range of 12 - 15, but apart from that slight difference, I am at loss to understand either the necessity for, or the real differences between the two youth choirs; however, no doubt someone might be kind enough to enlighten me.

The Youth Training Choir sang first two songs from Bernstein's West Side Story in choral

arrangements; *Something's Coming* followed by *Tonight*, which saw a boy and a girl come forward to take the spotlight for a brief solo each.

They followed this with an a cappella rendition of the only piece of music in the entire concert I was not familiar with. It was '*The Ribbon*' by Bob Chilcott. There were only a few boys in this choir but Overington certainly didn't let that bother him or them as he was able to blend their voices superbly with the girls, and gave them sections on their own. Again another strong and passionate conductor who understood the people he was conducting just as much as he understood the music, and knew how to get the absolute best from them. The change in dynamics were wonderful and a superb soft sweet ending.

The final song for them was back to piano accompaniment and was the famous and beautifully haunting melody from Gershwin's *Porgy And Bess*, '*Summertime*'. Their diction here was once again superb, and the heightened emotions brought out wonderfully. For me though it was sung in too strict a rhythm. It didn't really encapsulate the bluesy, note-stretching that is so evocative in this song. Admittedly not an easy thing to do with a choir, but if pulled off, it would have been standing ovation time.

Finally, the spotlight was turned upon the youngest of all the youth sections of the Halle, and the one with the largest membership too, the **Halle Children's Choir**. The choir was formed in 2008 and has a membership of over 80 youngsters aged between 8 and 12 years.

And so the 80-odd youngsters, wearing red, blue or yellow t-shirts with black trousers and bare feet took to the stage, and with piano accompaniment sang, acted and danced their way through the 6 songs known collectively as '*Once Upon A Time*' by Lin Marsh. The songs are especially written for a children's choir and are all about the different aspects of childhood, some with a more humorous twist, others based on nursery rhymes and one which worries about the future.

Under the vocal coaching of the choir's director **Shirley Court**, and the movement instruction of **Wendy Cook**

, this piece took on a life of its own and became something that would not have been out of place in a Musical, but did look a little incongruous at the end of a classical concert! Nevertheless, it was superbly done and some of the shapes and actions were extremely well thought through and fitting. I appreciated the spelling of '*Once Upon A Time*' at the beginning, and every child had remembered their moves and their vocal line without any prompting, since in an either mad or very brave move, the children were left on stage without any conductor or monitor, and so once they started they simply had to work together to get to the end. It was a gamble which didn't actually quite pay off. The final few notes were ragged and not together, and no-one knew when to bow. This was such a crying shame, since it was the finale of the whole event, and should have been stronger and more regimented.

Nevertheless, the children's choir sang (and danced) well, and the whole concert was a huge testament to the creative pulse in Greater Manchester, the vast amount of young talent that resides within its boundaries, and proving once again, that young people are our future.

The Halle are currently recruiting for all youth departments, and if interested visit <http://www.halle.co.uk/youth-ensembles-recruitment>