Minnesota Orchestra/Vänskä, BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London — aspects of Bernstein

A programme that represented Leonard Bernstein as composer, conductor and pianist

By George Hall

In one form or another, Leonard Bernstein maintains a presence throughout the current Prom season in his centenary year. In this programme by the Minnesota Orchestra under its music director Osmo Vänskä, for instance, he was represented not only as a composer but also as pianist and conductor. The composer came first. Though his 1956 comic operetta Candide has, despite interminable revamps, never won consistent success in the theatre, the brilliant overture remains his best-known work in the concert hall. With the Minnesota players alert and precise from the get-go, it opened the programme with a burst of vitality that mellowed into warmth when Vänskä sauntered into the succulent second subject. Broadway might not seem natural territory for the Finnish conductor, but he entered gamely into the piece's theatrical spirit, shaping its late-stage Rossinian crescendo with an expert fineness of judgment.

Among the works Bernstein championed as a pianist was Gershwin's snazzy Piano Concerto, here tackled with delicacy and flawless control by soloist Inon Barnatan. Both he and Vänskä emphasised the score's sophistication as well as its flirtations with modernism, helping to underline its genuine stature as well as its showbiz appeal. Barnatan's encore — Earl Wild's arrangement of Gershwin's “I Got Rhythm” — confirmed the pianist's light-fingered virtuosity.

The second half comprised a neglected symphony — Charles Ives' Second — previously heard only once at the Proms; although it dates from the turn of the 20th century, it remained unplayed anywhere until Bernstein conducted its premiere in 1951. If Ives' contemporaries were inclined to regard the composer as — not to put too fine a point on it — inept, then there are certainly signs of inexperience in this largely gentle and ruminative piece, which reflects his youthful respect for the European tradition of Brahms and Dvořák while also flinging into the mix a host of popular American melodies, of which “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean” — a kind of unofficial national anthem at the time — is the most prominent. But there is genius alongside the idiosyncrasies, and Vänskä's fluent and faithful account once again sought out the work's emotional heart rather than merely highlighting its slightly oddball surface.

★★★★☆