

FIRST NIGHT | CLASSICAL

London Sinfonietta review — a night of pranks and brilliant Polish music

Queen Elizabeth Hall



The London Sinfonietta was superb under Jonathan Berman's direction

[new](#)

[Richard Morrison](#)

Thursday April 28 2022, 12.00pm, The Times

★★★★☆

An evening of contemporary Polish orchestral music may sound a little daunting. And indeed, there were moments in Pawel Mykietyn's new *Prank* for chamber orchestra when I did feel as if I were trapped on a merry-go-round with a psychopath operating the speed lever.

Nearly 30 minutes long, it was built on a series of accelerations, usually of rising pitches or chords, superbly executed by the London Sinfonietta under Jonathan Berman's unflappable direction. These imploded into static "events": a pitch-bending, pianissimo clarinet solo, a virtuoso drum break, and so on. I couldn't detect any connecting logic. Then the accelerating merry-go-round lurched into life again. As with most Polish humour, I was baffled by what the prank was supposed to be, or on whom it was being played. The listener, probably. Perhaps Mykietyn was just taking the myki.

The two preceding pieces, however, were fascinating in very different ways. Krzysztof Penderecki's 1992 Sinfonietta for strings was written after the composer had cast aside his famous avant-garde shocks and shrieks, and reverted to more traditional forms and language. The Sinfonietta even includes fugal passages and contrasts between full strings and solo passages that evoke the baroque concerto grosso form. What Penderecki never cast aside, however, was intensity. This piece often went from lyrical melancholy to near hysterical brutality in the space of a few bars, yet never lost its cogency.

Then came the dazzling kaleidoscope of sounds — acoustic, electronic and from what its composer calls "objectophones", or the discarded jumble of "civilisational waste" — that is Wojciech Blazejczyk's Concerto for electric guitar, percussion, electronics and orchestra. The composer himself played the solo part, brilliantly, and with a variety of accessories (from a bow to nail files and a superball mallet) that produced sounds so far removed from what one expected — one of them like a Middle Eastern call to prayer — that I had to check to see that they were indeed coming from his instrument. His handling of the orchestra was equally original, and the emotional world he evoked — like a horror-movie soundtrack for the most part — was dark but always compelling. Masterly.

**CONCERT PRESENTED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY MUSIC (ICCM)**

<https://www.iccmlondon.org>