

Lighting up

Set up in a spirit of experimentation five years ago, the Aurora Orchestra was swiftly winning plaudits for its singular approach to eclectic programming. *Toby Deller reports*

A new dawn in classical music? That remains to be seen, and in any case the allusion in the name of the Aurora Orchestra is not to the Roman goddess of daybreak but the ethereally coloured display of the *aurora borealis* – the Northern Lights.

The orchestra was set up in 2004 by Nicholas Collon and fellow conductor Robin Ticciati. Things moved quickly: on the back of its first concert, the group was offered a two-year Leverhulme Fellowship from the Royal Academy of Music, plus the privilege of its first Aldeburgh Residency – an opportunity offered by the Britten-Pears School to spend quality rehearsal and creative project-development time together at the Snape Maltings arts complex.

Since those early days, the quality of the group's work has become increasingly recognised, witness its nomination earlier this year in the Young Artists category of the Royal Philharmonic Society music awards. Already in 2009 it has helped open the brand new Britten Studio at Aldeburgh and performed at the Polish-themed Sounds New festival in Canterbury, giving the UK premiere in the composer's presence of Penderecki's sextet. Upcoming engagements include accompanying the Proms Young Composers' Competition in August; looking further ahead, plans for a 'Weimar week' at Kings Place are coming together, and a big project for LSO St Luke's is taking shape (more on this later). Then there is its substantial ongoing education programme, too prolific to detail here, much of which is run in collaboration with the Da Capo Foundation.

Although nominally an orchestra, the ensemble's existence is somewhat hybrid – a one-to-a-part, but conducted, chamber group with extras drawn from a pool of regular players when required. Working this way, the group has built up an intriguing, varied repertoire, with a strength in early 20th-century European art music – Stravinsky, Hindemith, Schreker, Britten, chamber versions of Mahler, Debussy and Schoenberg, and so on. But much newer work is also fundamental. The orchestra happily tackles Birtwistle and Ligeti as well as tyros such as the American Nico Muhly – the orchestra, with its first violin Thomas Gould (a player making a name for himself as a soloist in his own right), gave the world premiere of his concerto for electric violin.

But the orchestra's eclecticism goes further. Alongside the more orthodox concerts and festival appearances, a key part of its programming involves creating its own new work. This has led

Stepping up: Aurora Orchestra



'In the very early stages our aim was just to see what happened, just to experiment,' explains Collon, sole conductor and artistic director now that Ticciati is pursuing his career in other high-profile ways elsewhere, 'out of which we have come up with very strong aims, aims which lots of orchestras share but which we try and do in our own way: to make the concert experience different and unique, to try and give another angle on to difficult contemporary or unusual repertoire.'

'We try to have a broad span of programming, so we'll do contemporary stuff but we'll also put in unusual works from Lully, Haydn, Mozart even, works to complement it. We'll rarely do a programme which is all contemporary music, all classical music – it's all combined repertoire.'

to the LSO St Luke's project, due to begin early in 2010, as Collon describes: 'The idea behind that is that we do a series of cross-arts collaborative concerts with young emerging artists from different art forms. So we'll explore capoeira, work with Mahogany Opera, with animation, puppetry, magicians, illustration, storytelling – all different media.'

'It's on the back of a concert we did last October [also at LSO St Luke's] with the capoeira group Cordão de Ouro. It was hard challenging music but it got people along. That's our angle forward in terms of our self-created work.'