

Thoughts from our Assistant Conductor, Dan Shilladay on "premiere" day.

So this was it - a whole term of preparation behind us, it was the big day: not one but two new pieces from our adopted composer, Ben See, would feature in the Stoneleigh Youth Orchestra Christmas concert, one each for the training and main orchestras.

Ben's eclectic and zany piece had already been taken to heart by the training orchestra. They naturally loved music which required biscuits to be eaten, but home-found percussion and maybe even the sung and shouted elements were also popular.

Ben's piece for the main orchestra was more elusive. He was keen that the players felt ownership of it, hence improvisatory elements - perfect for making a piece one's own, but daunting for some - and a rock band formed especially for the occasion and embedded in the orchestra. The onset of its closing section was marked by a mystery bar - the orchestra had to decide together what might happen in the 1/4 bar marked only with a '?' Worse still for the bashful, the score ended by asked that every player stand up individually and say a word that meant something to them. Much of the rehearsals in the preceding weeks had been dedicated to the theatre of this closing gesture, and the players were understandably unsure. In an effort to loosen everyone's natural reserve in this tricky element, conductor Rob Hodge had had everyone in a previous week shout out their favourite meat, rather than anything personally significant per se. Vegetarians had been allotted a cry of RSPCA.

But this was all behind us. The mystery bar was to be a stage blackout (and as from today, I was to press the necessary at exactly the right moment). The afternoon's rehearsal had been dominated by favourite meat products and other assorted foods. Would this happen in the concert?

The training orchestra's biscuits were ready, clasped in sticky paws as they took the stage. My watering can was mounted on a triangle stand by the podium, toothbrush-as-beater on hand. Ben was nothing if not democratic: being conductor of the training orchestra was no bar to joining the percussion riffs that convulse the later pages of the score. After a shaky rehearsal, I was a little apprehensive, but I needn't have been. The musicians took their piece with both hands and skipped gleefully through its wacky loops and ever denser, joyfully choreographed chaos. My watering can threatened to somersault into the first violins and I lost my toothbrush, but I didn't care; with a flash of inspiration I repurposed my baton, bulb end first, which seemed entirely in the character of the piece and sounded rather better.

Just the main orchestra's performance to go. Of all the things I had to perform this evening - conductor of the training orchestra, rank and file viola in the main orchestra's tricky programme for which I'd not made many rehearsals - turning off the lights in Ben's *fingerprint plurals* was easily the most nerve wracking. In a dim corner of the stage and with my phone torch on in preparation for the blackout I followed the score, marvelling at the wealth of detail and autonomy Ben had crammed in. We reached the mystery bar and Hammersmith Town Hall's elderly lighting rig obliged with perfect darkness. I could hear the players of the orchestra wind through their improvised loops and finish with their standing up words. I gruffly added my own, slightly cheating two ('climate change') into the dying echoes from the rest of the orchestra. There were still a few favourite meats in the mix, but then new, unexpected and achingly perfect, in the gathering silence and ultimately taking its place as the final gesture of the piece, the orchestra's leader stood up and spoke her word, clearly, calmly but proudly to the darkened hall: 'musician'.