

Friends of the NYOW

Berlin - August 2004

The last concert of this year's extremely successful UK summer tour was held on Sunday, 8th August at St. David's Hall, Cardiff. After such a busy schedule of performances around Wales and also at Hereford and Worcester cathedrals the members of the orchestra were still able to display a degree of verve and commitment that would be a fine example to many a professional orchestra.

Early the following morning, they were en route for the final concert of the season in Berlin. On Tuesday morning, the day after their arrival in Berlin, they were taken on a lightning tour of the city. The weather was glorious - in fact a little too hot for comfortable sight-seeing as the temperatures soared into the 30s.



The guide prepares for the tour

However, everyone enjoyed the tour thanks to a very informative local guide who provided

us with some interesting insights into Berlin's cultural and social history.



Flying the flag at the Brandenburg Gate

This was the first NYOW tour outside the UK for many years and the occasion and venue could hardly have been more prestigious. The orchestra had been invited to perform in the "Young Euro Classic" concert series in Berlin. Youth orchestras from all over Europe - including Ireland, Spain, Finland, Latvia and Germany - were taking part in this festival extending over a period of almost three weeks. The venue for these concerts was the superb Konzerthaus am Gendarmenmarkt.



This famous concert hall was opened in May 1821, replacing a hall on the same site which had once been visited by no less a composer

than Mozart. In November 1826 the first Berlin performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony took place here and in 1844 Wagner conducted the first performance in Berlin of "The Flying Dutchman". During the rest of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the hall saw performances by many great orchestras, conductors and soloists of international renown. In December 1989, shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall, Leonard Bernstein conducted a performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony which was broadcast worldwide.

Undaunted by such a venerable history and confronted by a packed house, the NYOW were to deliver an outstanding performance of a challenging programme.

It was indeed a privilege to have been present and we all felt great pride at witnessing such an achievement.

Our orchestra had produced one of the best performances of the series and the reception by the audience was overwhelming. No wonder - the playing by all sections of the orchestra was of exceptional quality. The performance of Ceiri Torjussen's "Momentum" was greeted with the wildest applause I've experienced in any concert hall and at the end of the Elgar symphony the audience would not allow the orchestra to leave the platform. And this was an audience where young people were in the ascendancy. How refreshing for once to see grey power outnumbered in a concert hall. An encore did little to quell their enthusiasm, and it took all of Owain Arwel Hughes's powers of persuasion to convince them that the concert had finally ended.

The concert was a triumph which deserved a fitting celebration and this was to be provided by the British Embassy immediately afterwards. The whole orchestra, together with friends and supporters, were treated to a reception at the magnificent new British Embassy not far from the Brandenburg Gate.



Owain Arwel Hughes at the British Embassy

Fortified by an excellent buffet the orchestra demonstrated their vocal skills with spirited renderings of Calon Lan and Mae Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau. This was surely a night the embassy will not forget.

As a supporter of the orchestra who might be accused of a certain lack of impartiality in my judgement of their performance I was gratified to read reviews in the Berlin press over the next few days confirming what I had felt. The following are extracts from long and detailed reviews of the NYOW performance.

"The conclusion of the third slow movement (of the Elgar symphony) with its muted strings and clarinets fading away into silence was played with such perfection that one ceased breathing and could hear only the beating of one's own heart." (Berliner Zeitung, 12th Aug 2004)

"Owain Arwel Hughes directed this excellent ensemble with a safe and steady hand, even

though the ceiling of the concert hall seemed on the point of collapsing as Ceiri Torjussen's 'Momentum' was unleashed.

Holst's orchestration (of The Perfect Fool) is a most attractive blend. It is both rich in colour and rhythmically spicy. The Welsh youngsters gave a glittering display of their ability. They enjoyed the fun of such a compositional challenge." (Berliner Morgenpost, 12th August 2004)

The Berlin visit was an experience to be cherished for many years to come. To see the young people of Wales achieving such high standards in an international festival is a cause for celebration. As Friends of the NYOW - without whose assistance the venture would not have been possible - we must continue to praise, support and promote an institution which represents the best in the cultural life of the nation.

Congratulations are due not only to all the members of the orchestra but also to their conductor, the tutors and the pastoral and administrative staff who worked so hard to make the 2004 summer course such a success.

With the orchestra's sixtieth anniversary fast approaching we must do everything we can to ensure that its achievements are given the recognition they deserve both in Wales and further afield.

John Watkins - Chair of the Friends of the NYOW