

artsfirst night

Concert

LPO/Vänskä

Festival Hall

★★★★☆

I am as happy as the next middle-aged hypochondriac pessimist. But even for me there was a bit too much of the Grim Reaper in this concert.

First came Rachmaninov's aptly named orchestral tone-poem *The Isle of the Dead*, with the doom-laden *Dies Irae* plainchant woven into its sepulchral textures, albeit in a groovy five-in-a-bar. That was followed by Rachmaninov's Paganini Rhapsody, where the *Dies Irae* is again prominent. Then we were treated to another piano-and-orchestra blockbuster — Liszt's *Totentanz* — based on you'll never guess which bit of plainchant.

And all this terrors-of-the-tomb stuff came before the interval! I staggered to the bar not knowing whether to have a beer or a cup of hemlock.

Yet it was mostly superbly played. Should I ever decide to place myself at the tender mercy of Dignitas, I shall certainly request Osmo Vänskä, the London Philharmonic and the German pianist Bernd Glemser to enliven my last hours.

The latter was the biggest revelation, if only because he is obviously a mature and consummately gifted virtuoso, capable of both poetry and fireworks, whose name was unknown to almost everyone in the hall, me included. Where has Glemser been hiding? At times in the Paganini Rhapsody I wondered if he had enough personality for a piece that has a touch of the pantomime villain about its devilry. But the tensile strength and clarity of his playing was gripping, he and Vänskä maintained exemplary rapport, and in the *Totentanz* — played, in an epic display of herculean stamina, immediately after the Rachmaninov — he brilliantly captured the contrasts between the (presumably tongue-in-cheek) religiosity of the pastiche Bach chorales and the showmanship of those preposterous glissandos and thunderous prestissimo chords.

As for Vänskä, every orchestra needs one, occasionally. A tough pedant, I mean, who insists on detail yet brings a thrilling intensity to the performance. The climax of *The Isle of the Dead* was all the more shattering for being built with such discipline and control from the early, deceptive calm. And if Dvorák's Seventh Symphony could have done with a little more sunshine, there was no denying the exhilaration of Vänskä's manic drive through the final two movements.

Richard Morrison