

MUSIC
RSNO: AN AMERICAN
FESTIVAL I

USHER HALL, EDINBURGH

★★★★

IN HIS pre-concert talk, conductor Peter Oundjian mentioned his desire to take the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in new directions in his first season, following the French explorations of his predecessor, Stéphane Denève. Hence the inspired inclusion of two American-themed concerts.

And as soon as the music in the first of them began, it seemed as though Oundjian had transformed his band almost overnight into a sleek, shiny Stateside outfit – one that was wonderfully brash and brazen in the gripping *Candide Overture* by Bernstein that opened the concert.

Ever the showman, Oundjian seemed in his element in this glittering music, both in the grand sweep of his conducting and in the anecdotes from his

time over the pond with which he regaled the audience.

Also in his element was Canadian pianist Jon Kimura Parker, in an exceptionally fresh, vivid account of the Gershwin *Piano Concerto*, dark and sultry in the piece's jazz workouts, yet with a brittleness that stressed just how new the piece still sounds 80 years after it was written. The RSNO was on fine form, too, with an easy energy and a real sense of fun – one that continued when Kimura Parker pulled out a virtuoso solo arrangement of Danny Elfman's *Simpsons* theme as an encore.

The concert highlight, though, was Oundjian's searing vision of John Adams's huge post-minimalist *Harmonielehre*. There were moments when the urgency of the music's pulsating repetitions slackened, but Oundjian had the measure of the piece's slow build-ups and shattering climaxes.

He may have just found his new direction.

DAVID KETTLE