

The sound of Britain – provocative and diverse

CLASSICAL

MACMILLAN PREMIERE

RSNO, GLASGOW ROYAL CONCERT HALL

Conductor Peter Oundjian clearly likes to push the envelope. Last season – his first as the Royal Scottish National Orchestra's music director – he made his mark by transforming the band into a sleek, powerful machine for some illuminating American music. To kick

off the current season, he turned his attention to Britain. But you'd have been disappointed if you were expecting any narrow patriotism or reassuring country idylls – this was bold, provocative and strikingly diverse.

Boldest of all was placing a new piano concerto as the opening concert's centrepiece. The RSNO's Edinburgh and Glasgow performances marked the first UK outing of James MacMillan's Third Piano Concerto. And it was an extraordinary experience – a rollercoaster ride through plainsong

fragments, Messiaen-like chirrupings and radiant brass chorales, all held together by MacMillan's expert ear for orchestral sound and musical trajectory.

Titled *The Mysteries of Light*, the concerto is based around five Catholic meditations on luminosity introduced by Pope John Paul II in 2002.

Accordingly, the piece balances a searching, turbulent spirituality with sparkling, light-filled exuberance – clanging bells and chimes heightening the glitter of the piano part, and brass and strings glowing

darkly. Britten's Simple Symphony might have seemed a little demure for a new season's first concert, but there was nothing simple about Oundjian's intense, urgent reading of the piece – he seemed to wring every last drop of emotion out of the deceptively straightforward score.

Listen to the BBC Radio 3 broadcast of the RSNO's opening season concert until Oct 11 at www.bbc.co.uk

TRATING ★★★★★

David Kettle