

São Paulo Symphony Orchestra

BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London

★★★★☆

Hannah Nepil

"Come on, you cannot be so shy," cajoled Gabriela Montero. The Venezuelan pianist waited a few more moments for somebody in the audience to suggest a tune. When we remained mute, she launched into a virtuosic set of variations on *Land of Hope and Glory*, which metamorphosed from Baroque polyphony into ragtime. A typically Promsian encore, you might say, except that it was improvised on the spot.

This is Montero's party trick, and she is astoundingly good at it. What a shame, then, this early evening Prom with the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra gave her less opportunity than usual to flaunt it. Her main offering was Grieg's Piano Concerto in A minor, Op 16, in a

performance that never quite took off.

Not that it lacked delicacy, or lyricism. And it certainly didn't lack ideas; Montero seemed determined to put her stamp on each bar. But that was also the problem. With many phrases stretched beyond snapping point, the result often came across as laboured or, worse, shapeless. Even the orchestra, under its music director Marin Alsop, sounded as though it was wading through porridge.



Virtuosity: Gabriela Montero

Which isn't Alsop's usual style at all, and she spent the rest of the concert proving it. Marlos Nobre's *Kabbalah*, Op 96, a peculiar blend of Judaic mysticism and South American razzmatazz, buzzed with rhythmic vitality. Villa Lobos's *Bachianas brasileiras No 4: Prelude* had more than enough textural transparency and friction to underline its composer's veneration for J.S. Bach.

But the final performance was worth all the others put together: Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* makes the most of Alsop's needlepoint precision and grace. She relished the third movement's crisp syncopations, and the filigree woodwind writing. In her hands the music retained all its champagne sparkle. But she also embraced its sobriety – in the sinister muted brass of the second movement, and those moments when the work pauses for air. Then, for an encore, she ramped the voltage up still further with music by Brazil's Edu Lobo: boisterous, athletic, perfectly poised.

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