

LSO/Davis/Noseda at Lincoln Centre, New York

5 stars

Richard Morrison

New York's musical public is famously hard to impress. But three times in five days the audience at Avery Fisher Hall, home of the New York Philharmonic, surged to its feet to give a standing ovation to the London Symphony Orchestra — and in repertoire which, by New York standards, verged on the esoteric: Britten's War Requiem, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and Sibelius.

The LSO's annual residencies at Lincoln Centre are usually well received, particularly if the home team is going through a less-than-glittering era. But this was a triumph, all the more to be savoured because the omens had not seemed auspicious. Two months ago, at the Proms, the LSO's performance of the *Missa Solemnis*, also directed by Colin Davis, simply didn't gell. Here, by contrast, it sounded cogent, unanimous and imbued with a massive spirituality under a conductor who, as he unfolded this epic over nearly two hours, seemed to shed his years and physical frailty and rekindle the old fire. That was infectious. The London Symphony Chorus hurled out those cruel high lines with astounding vigour, as did four fine soloists (with Sarah Connolly outstanding).

The Sibelius programme was less grandiose but no less impassioned. Davis has always been capable of assembling the Finn's diffuse threads with magisterial authority. But here the Second Symphony had something else: an intensity close to anger in the craggy brass outbursts; audacious rubato; and blazing exhilaration from a superbly galvanised orchestra in that hard-won finale. Nikolaj Znaider's interpretation of the Violin Concerto was just as bold: ardent, urgent and nuanced with a wild Romantic fervour where most violinists opt for austere Nordic beauty.

But it was Sunday's performance of the War Requiem that made the biggest impact. Britten's setting of Wilfred Owen's poetry, sung with such unhistrionic understanding by Simon Keenlyside and Ian Bostridge, has a particularly tragic resonance in a city still reflecting on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Owen's line about the "march of this retreating world" seems as relevant as in 1918. And Gianandrea Noseda's unashamedly dramatic interpretation held the audience transfixed. It was all so vivid: the opening choral whispers like the echoes of dead souls; the tolling bells and ominous fanfares; and the slow crescendo of mourning murmurs in the final moments — an overwhelming evocation of the grief, the waste and the pity of war.

Noseda and Znaider are very much the coming men. The LSO should woo them both assiduously.