

**BBC SSO & Antony Hermus**

City Halls, Glasgow



"THIS concert is a bit bananas," observed BBC SSO violinist Alex Gascoine in his pre-concert interview with conductor Antony Hermus. A blunt assessment, perhaps, but – well, as an orchestra insider, Gascoine would probably know. Most definitely bananas – intentionally so – were the coloratura soprano arias swiped from Ligeti's opera *Le grand macabre* and repackaged as *Mysteries of the Macabre*, a thoroughly entertaining if entirely mystifying (yes, intentionally so) stream of gibberish given a flouncing, startlingly incisive performance by Sara Hershkowitz, brandishing a bucket of KFC and a litre bottle of Irn-Bru. Even more bananas was the decision to preface it with Haydn's sober *Philosopher Symphony*, which Hermus delivered with wonderful precision and stylish restraint.

Winning the prize for bananas, however, was Dutch composer and arranger Henk de Vlioger, for his attempt to condense Wagner's 16-hour Ring cycle into an hour-long, orchestra-only "adventure" which formed the concert's second half. There were no

resting-place, between cheeky adventures.

The Oor Wullie stories, though – with their range of 1930s style smalltown characters, from naughty gangs of weans to tetchy but good-hearted policeman – are perhaps a shade more inclined to show their age; and there's no doubting the scale of the challenge taken on by young musical-writing team Noisemaker (writer Scott Gilmour and composer Claire McKenzie) when they set out to transform the beloved Oor Wullie comic strip into a 21st century musi-

doubt good intentions behind the 1991 endeavour, but the result is simply bizarre – opera without voices, bleeding chunks sewn together (usually very smoothly, it should be said), and a whistle-stop rattle through the tetralogy's first three operas only to spend the final half-hour immersed in *Götterdämmerung*. The gargantuan BBC SSO assembled for the occasion played its heart out, despite Hermus's rather workaday direction, which struggled to conjure atmosphere when required, and felt a bit foursquare when it might have been yielding and expressive. It was as if Hermus had decided to play it straight, when it all needed to be a bit more – you guessed it, bananas.

**DAVID KETTLE**