

As the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland celebrate their 40th anniversary, **David Kettle** reports on two concerts which team young talent with established professionals – NYOS alumnus Steven Osborne and conductor Elim Chan

**M**y most intense musical experiences growing up were in orchestras,” says Steven Osborne, one of today’s most admired piano soloists. “I probably learnt more from the experience of being in an orchestra than I ever did sitting at the piano.”

Osborne is thinking back to his many years as a boy playing in the orchestra of St Mary’s Music School in Edinburgh, where he began his musical training. And he’s doing so because of an imminent project, in which he’s soloist with the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland Symphony Orchestra for its two spring concerts in Edinburgh and Glasgow – one of the focal points of NYOS’s 40th anniversary celebrations.

What exactly was it about playing in an orchestral setting that so influenced him early on? “It’s being part of a big group of players, and being conducted in intense music – being inside a big sound,” he says. “There’s no way of replicating it. It introduces you to all kinds of feelings you’re just not able to experience on your own.”

Elim Chan, who will be conducting the two NYOS spring concerts, shares Osborne’s sentiments, and stresses youth orchestras’ crucial importance beyond music. “They’re not only there to nurture the passion and technique for music performance, but they’re also vital in cultivating the sense of doing, experiencing and achieving something together with people from other places and backgrounds,” she says.

The energetic Hong Kong-born



conductor, herself only a few years older than some of the musicians she’ll be conducting, is also Principal Guest Conductor of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, and her position on the podium with the NYOS SO marks the start of a three-year relationship between the two organisations. With several RSNO players themselves NYOS alumni, that feels only right.

It’s the first time that both Chan and Osborne have worked with NYOS, and the repertoire they’ve chosen for their concerts is hardly unchallenging. Alongside the Scottish premiere of

*Liguria* by Swedish composer Andrea Tarrodi, their concerts’ centrepiece is Rachmaninov’s Third Piano Concerto, one of the most demanding concertos in the repertoire, for soloist and orchestra alike. “I performed it once in my 20s,” Osborne explains, “but I didn’t do it again immediately after that. And it’s such a hard piece, so it starts to feel like such a lot of work to get it going again. Last season I thought it would be good to do it again. It was an enormous amount of work – I fundamentally relearned it – but I’ve loved playing it again. It’s almost like being addicted

– when I put it back on the shelf after practising, I realised I was really missing it.”

Chan completes the programme with Ravel’s glittering orchestration of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an*

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**Clockwise from main: NYOS violinist Daniel Stroud; Steven Osborne; Elim Chan**



*Exhibition*, a work destined to showcase the NYOS orchestra. "Particular musicians will get to shine, while some movements call for a collective effort from all sections," she explains. "And it's a great piece to promote camaraderie, support and appreciation for each other."

Chan will join the NYOS players for a full week of intensive rehearsals in the lead-up to the concerts. The orchestra's current leader, 19-year-old violinist Daniel Stroud, has been with the orchestra since 2016, steadily working his way up the first violin section to become second in importance only to the conductor. He explains how this rehearsal week pans out: "For the first part of the week, our main rehearsals are sectionals, with the orchestra's smaller sections working separately," he says. "Then we'll have two hours in the evenings with a full orchestra. For the second half of the week, we work as a full orchestra for the whole day."

Stroud is also keen to stress the intensity of the NYOS experience. "It's very personal, quite intimate, almost like a family. It's a week-long course with everyone there 24/7, so you get to know everybody involved really well."

These April concerts mark Osborne and Chan's first collaborations with NYOS, though they've both worked with youth orchestras elsewhere. How do they find the experience of working with young musicians, compared with a professional ensemble?

"What I'm most aware of is the extreme enthusiasm of young players," says Osborne. "You can feel the difference in intensity – everyone is just so excited. I'm guessing many

of the players won't have played these pieces before, so it's a very special experience."

And that's an experience that Chan herself shares. "I'm also conducting many pieces for the first time, so it's wonderful to explore and experiment with these young people – but I also challenge them and set the bar just as high as I would with a professional orchestra."

This aspirational way of working has, in Chan's view, broader aims. "It depends on each member helping, communicating, understanding and taking care of one another. Today we spend very little time having real and quality connections with others, so I truly think youth orchestras and choirs are elemental in planting seeds of unity, bringing people together to create harmony, beauty and meaning in this fractured world." ■

**The National Youth Orchestras of Scotland Symphony Orchestra performs at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on 12 April, and at Glasgow Royal Concert Hall on 13 April, [www.nyos.co.uk](http://www.nyos.co.uk); see right for details of how to win tickets**

## Inside story

Coming soon: NYOS Alumni Stories. Ten short films featuring NYOS alumni from all walks of life. Watch the teaser trailer now at [www.nyos.co.uk](http://www.nyos.co.uk). Also, in *The Scotsman* in the weeks ahead, look out for interviews with prominent NYOS alumni Sarah Ayoub, Colin Currie, Nicola Benedetti and Malcolm Edmonstone, and learn how the National Youth Orchestras of Scotland helped shape their careers.