

From The Times

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## Orchestra Europa at Queen Elizabeth Hall

**The Russian pianist Alexander Melnikov was less than animated, but the orchestra swerved and swooned under Scott Ellaway**

Geoff Brown



What do you expect from an orchestra of musicians in their early twenties? The aspects of youth, I'd say: hope and joy; passion, excitement; even reckless abandon. The British-based Orchestra Europa, founded four years ago to bridge the gap between the college years and the start of a professional career with concerts and further training, offers all these accoutrements and more.

At 27, its conductor and instigator Scott Ellaway is not hugely older than those at the other end of his little baton — first seen swirling round in Smetana's *Bartered Bride* overture. At the moment unusual programming isn't the organisation's forte: the bill continued with Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto and the usual swag bag from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* ballet. Yet there was nothing dutiful in the way these gifted musicians from Britain's music colleges bent to their task. The sound was bright, well-balanced and definitely hot-blooded.

The concert's one uninterested party appeared to be the Russian pianist Alexander Melnikov. He looked at his Steinway like a bank clerk facing Monday morning. Professional sheen? There in plenty in the Tchaikovsky, along with some thumping finger power. But little sign of love; no individual inflections of phrases or rhythms. Happily, the orchestra surged and swooned as if the piece was newly composed. Instrumental beauties leapt out of *Romeo and Juliet*: a plangent cello here, bold brass there. One might wish for less broad-brushed interpretation from Ellaway, one with lighter textures savoured in between Prokofiev's grand slams, and a sharper nose for dance rhythms. Better overenthusiasm, though, than an orchestra and conductor sleepwalking towards doom.