

# Novice Edinburgh conductor leads the RSN0



It was never going to be an ordinary concert. Tuesday's early-evening performance from the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (or, strictly speaking, a larger-than-normal band expanded with quite a few unfamiliar faces) came at the end of a two-day Takeover project, where almost all of the orchestra's departments – from planning to production, marketing to development, and, of course, musical performance – were gleefully hijacked by 40 16 to 18 year-olds from right across Scotland. It was all in the name of education and new audience engagement, of course, and it was the first time that the RSN0 had dared such a thing. And judging by the beaming faces of youngsters and RSN0 staffers alike, it worked a treat.

Two hectic days of meetings, discussions and intensive decision-making culminated in the hour-long concert for

friends, family and invited guests, performed by the RSNO regulars whose ranks were swelled by several young players. A decision had been made to break with classical tradition and invite the orchestra on stage section by section – an interesting approach that highlighted the sheer number of musicians, even if it ironically seemed to set up its own formality.



After introductions and explanations of what the various groups of students had been up to, RSNO assistant conductor Jean-Claude Picard launched into a sparkling account of Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* Overture, showing off the big, rich sound of the enlarged RSNO but balancing it with a subtle nimbleness in the quieter sections.

Then came a surprise, as two novice (or almost novice) conductors took to the podium for movements from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* Suite. Isla Ratcliffe from Edinburgh took on the Overture and March, giving a crisp, clear beat that some professional conductors could learn from, and ably stressing the phrase shapes with her eloquent gestures. Alice Guse from



Glasgow, who directed the Chinese and Arabian dances as well as the Russian trepak, took a Boulez-like chopped-hand approach, but was no less effective for that, the orchestra following every movement in her precise direction. It no doubt took guts to stand in front of 100 professional musicians and tell them what to do, but there was little sense of the orchestra simply playing the music their own way – the players hung on the two young conductors' moves and responded with vivid, characterful performances.



Jean-Claude Picard returned to the platform for the concert's final item, a beautifully (and appropriately) fluid account of Smetana's much-loved river evocation 'Vltava' from *Ma vlast*, with confident contributions from student bassoonists Beth Beattie and Andrew Vettriano, as well as resonant timpani playing from Brodie McCash.

It was billed as an elaborate work-experience project, but the two-day Takeover was far more than that. By offering the students the opportunities to control all the orchestra's activities, but then expecting them to rise to the challenge

with little sense of a safety net, the RSN0 showed great faith in the abilities and commitment of its young invitees. And that faith was more than repaid in a highly memorable evening of music.