Shostakovich sold short

Ismene Brown

27 July 2006 • 12:01am

Ismene Brown reviews a triple bill by the Mariinsky Ballet at London Coliseum

The head-to-head taking place in London this summer between the Mariinsky and Bolshoi Theatres is all about Shostakovich. The Mariinsky (formerly the Kirov) wanted to do him wall-to-wall in his centenary, but the Mariinsky's impresarios, the Hochhausers, who enabled several Shostakovich Western premières long ago, knew he wouldn't sell a summer season at the Royal Opera House - and instead turned to the more commercially amenable Bolshoi.

After all the betrayals that Shostakovich suffered in his life, it's tragic that he has been hung out to dry between two extremes, both for the sincerest motives.

For without the Mariinsky's heartfelt, unpopular season, we would not know the extent of the brilliantly theatrical music denied an outlet for so long.

The pity is that many of the productions are penitential theatre.

Shostakovich was way ahead of the choreography available in Russia for the last half-century. Our ears open now and we must pray for better producers, which may be the Mariinsky's eventual reward.

The triple bill looked a good bet, with three choreographers taking on music that is generously entertaining, often so tuneful as to make Dvor\u02C7ák weep, and nicely chopped up into numbers for ease of use.

All three ballets use music from Shostakovich's youth, but the stagings date from decades later, 1961-2, the most pompous Soviet era, when the then-named Kirov Ballet was opening its huge talents to the West - its tours, ironically enough, enabled by the Hochhausers.

The ballets then featured three superb talents, Yury Soloviev, Natalia Makarova and Valery Panov. Now the Mariinsky fields the marvellous Ulyana Lopatkina, Igor Kolb and Igor Zelensky, but it's not enough when the productions do downright harm to his music.

The Young Lady and the Hooligan pits Asbo boys against saintly girl teachers, fixing up a synthetic love story that enshrines the Soviet love of sexual-gesture politics, males as warmongers, females as angelic hearth-mothers.

Konstantin Boyarsky's choreography looks frighteningly old-fashioned and posturing, when one thinks of Balanchine and Ashton in that period. Zelensky, dancing blazingly in his worker's cap, leaping in wonderful scything shapes, and the delicate Svetlana Ivanova could not make this ridiculous tale feel truthful, for all the prettiness of the music.

The Bedbug started better, odder, with sailors hunkering on in Leonid Jakobson's more personal and grotesque response to Shostakovich's satirical incidental music for a play. Still, it rapidly plunged into incomprehensibility, with a madly costumed vaudeville that left everyone within earshot as baffled as I was.

Perhaps Mayakovsky's play should be restored. Igor Belsky's Leningrad Symphony, set to the first movement of Shostakovich's excoriating 1942 seventh symphony, has the blessing of Lopatkina and Kolb, whose humanity and magnetism cannot disguise the choreography's black-white gesturing and the incompleteness of the musical experience.

Tugan Sokhiev conducted the first two ballets with a colour and vim that made me hope to hell that choreographers were in the audience feeling inflamed - they are surely stageable, only not like this. Valery Gergiev conducted the Leningrad, massive, ambiguous music that should be left to speak in its own terms.

- Until Sat. Tickets: 0870 145 0200