

Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark

The Who, Eden Sessions, Eden Project, 25 July 2023

We were three or four songs into The Who's set before I recognised a tune. It was 'The Acid Queen' from *Tommy*, which to be honest I remember more from Tina Turner's bellowed version in the film than any album. However, that swiftly led to 'Pinball Wizard' and the uplifting 'See Me, Feel Me/Listening to You'. All of this was accompanied by an orchestra: brass helping the power of each tune, strings sawing away with rhythmic energy – all, however, really not needed. I've never seen The Who live before, but I can report that Pete Townsend's reputation for guitar playing is well-founded. When he turns it up and lets rip with overdriven chords, the whole area shakes.

Of course, it's not always clear who is doing what. The Who are no longer a quartet, and although Roger Daltrey seems in fine voice, there's a backing singer skulking near the bass player, Townsend's son on various guitars and two keyboardists as well as their bass player. And a drummer who plays the whole night with his sweatshirt hood up but – and I say this as an avid hater of most rock drumming – his kit is superbly miked up and he is consistently brilliant. The orchestra are spread out across the stage, behind the band, with a conductor's podium on the right of the stage. The crowd enjoy singing along to 'Who Are You' ('ooo oo ooo oo') which comes after the *Tommy* selection finishes, but to be honest, it's a relief when the orchestra leave the stage and the band perform a bunch of their songs from what Townsend calls their first period, that is before they split up in 1982.

The band's set on their own is 1960s and 70s rock at its best: catchy tunes, huge propulsive rhythms and monster guitar punctuating the song and occasionally breaking out in to ecstatic solos. If Townsend's windmilling arm and Daltrey's microphone swinging antics seem merely affectations these days, it would be churlish of me to complain too loudly. They seem to be enjoying themselves, and it's probably what the audience want.

The band motor through 'The Kids Are Alright', 'You Better You Bet', 'Substitute', 'My Generation' and more, with joshing and abuse between Townsend and Daltrey, before a rousing 'Won't Get Fooled Again' acts as the storm before the calm. Townsend welcomes back a cello and violin for a beautiful, fragile version of 'Behind Blue Eyes', and then the whole orchestra troop back on for a selection of tracks from *Quadrophenia*. To be honest, after an amazing '5.15', 'The Rock' just went on and on, and 'Love Reign Over Me' took an age to get going, with an extended and seemingly never ending piano introduction. After some band introductions we get a monster 'Baba O'Riley', that slowly builds and builds over

its addictively repetitive keyboard patterns before sprawling into a big finale.

'Baba O'Riley' is sometimes wrongly known as 'Teenage Wasteland', but Eden was not a wasteland and teenagers were somewhat thin on the ground. This was a nostalgic evening out for grandparents and parents, all busy swigging cider and risking a bit of dancing. They clapped and cheered and sang along, then had a little rest, had another little dance, and then made their orderly way towards the exits, up the long zigzagging slope, taking one last quick lingering look at the glowing biomes. As the final event in this year's Eden Sessions, getting The Who was quite a coup, so well done all. Here's to more exciting music and sunshine evenings at the Eden Project next year.

Rupert Loydell