

Episodes

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The evening opened with no orchestra, only a choir. Poulenc's *Figure Humaine*, scored for a double six-part vocal ensemble, is an intensely demanding work, a setting of eight poems by Paul Éluard written in the depths of the Second World War. The occupation of France had both darkened and hardened the oblique sensuality of Éluard's imagery and Poulenc sought to reflect this in the unusual harmonies and rhythms of his part writing; the resulting cantata can be difficult to bring off, and even a flawless performance can be unnerving.

The Rundfunkchor seemed, for the most part, undaunted by the work's complexities, sustaining a thoughtful elegance through eight poems of very different character. The basses were especially impressive, illuminating subtle harmonic flourishes by giving them an understated presence more felt than heard; they anchored the opening 'De tous les printemps du monde,' adding space to the total sound rather than mere depth, and they were very much the heartbeat that propelled the magnificent 'La menace sous le ciel rouge'. Equally impressive was the frantic cross-cutting of female voices that opened 'En chantant les servantes s'élancent', here rendered with remarkable clarity.

While none of the sections suffered from weak or uncommitted performances, the final two were exceptionally well-realised. After the agitation and introspection of the earlier poems, the sombre 'Le menace' had an almost devotional quality that would not have sounded out of place in a less secular work, and the concluding 'Liberté' experienced a gradual increase in fervour and texture until, in the final verses, the unaccompanied choir began to suggest the fullness of sound that Poulenc often achieved in his largest-scale orchestra works. The determination in Éluard's ode to freedom may have been born of despair, but in this performance of Poulenc's setting, one was left with the sense, however vague, of distant hope.

Inspiration often comes from the unlikeliest of places, and for Charles Koechlin it came from Kipling's *The Jungle Book*; yet after the urgency of Poulenc's choral writing, *Les Bandar-log* offered a perplexing coda to the programme's first half. The piece, scored for a reasonably large orchestra including tenor and soprano saxophones, featured a series of tentative episodes that seemed underdeveloped on their own and only passingly related as a

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Berlin, jueves, 18 de febrero de 2016.

Philharmonie.

Poulenc: *Figure Humaine*.

Koechlin: *Les*

Bandar-log, op. 176. Kurtág: *Petite Musique solennelle en hommage à Pierre Boulez* 90. Ravel: *Daphnis et Chloé*.

Rundfunkchor Berlin. Berlin Philharmonic.

Sir Simon Rattle, conductor



group. There were, to be sure, a few memorable moments – one brief segment suggested a drunken fugue for strings – and several intriguing instrumental groupings, including an arresting passage for violin, celesta and harp, but as a symphonic poem it seemed both excessively abstract, and curiously uninvolved. One might have expected a piece about monkeys to have more in the way of manic energy.

György Kurtág's *Petite Musique solennelle en hommage à Pierre Boulez 90*, performed after the interval, was in some ways the outlier of the programme, a work of exacting focus in an evening of loosely connected episodes. The piece, first performed at the Lucerne Festival last August and receiving its German première on this evening, was written while its dedicatee was still alive; the fact that it now served as a memorial may have lent an extra poignancy to the performance, but the brief, enigmatic and wholly captivating score would have been no less moving even if Boulez had still been with us.

It was a work of placid surfaces and subtle harmonic tensions, both small and solemn as the title promised, but hinting at something larger and less immediately perceptible. Although the orchestration called for an accordion, a cimbalom and a bass flute, Kurtág seemed less concerned with individual moments of unusual sonority than with the creation of sustained, ever-shifting textures, broken only by the occasional intrusion. Certainly the slow pace and unity of purpose in this birthday-homage-turned-elegy served to set it apart from the expansive programmatic works that surrounded it.

Pierre Boulez, the subject of Kurtág's *Petite Musique solennelle*, was in addition to his groundbreaking work as a composer one of the twentieth century's most eloquent advocates for the full version of Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. The less unwieldy and more popular second suite is no rarity in concert programmes, but the chance to hear the *symphonie chorégraphique* in its entirety was undoubtedly a draw for many in the audience.

Yet by the end of the first fifteen minutes, even the most ardent admirer of the piece could not have helped but notice a pronounced lack of inspiration. The introduction, despite its agreeable balance between choir and orchestra, sounded tepid and efficient, drained of its pastoral mystery, and the first two dances suffered from the same episodic quality that had made the earlier Koechlin piece so disjointed. Even the orchestra sounded less finely disciplined than normal, failing somehow to inject their usual splendour into what should have been a routine proceeding. Anyone who had attended the luminous concert performances of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* earlier in the season might well have wondered if this could really be the same orchestra and conductor.

But then something happened: everything snapped into sharp focus like a needle suddenly finding the groove, and what had started as meandering and uninspired locked into something precise, expansive and ceaselessly exciting, as if some invisible switch deep beneath the Philharmonie had been flipped. It started during the nocturne at the end of part one; the strings had started to play – one could see the bows trembling above the bridges – but the sound was so rapturously quiet that, for a second it sounded as though someone had accidentally turned on the air circulation in the auditorium. What had been pedestrian only seconds earlier now sounded like music from another world.

Into this hypnotic moment, the wordless choir began their ascent toward a peak of mild dissonance and, when the orchestra returned in full force, it was with an enthusiasm that was all the more striking for having been so largely absent from the performance to that point. The clarinets snaked their way through intricate runs, the flutes rippled, the trombones portended. Delicate moments such as Chloé's danse suppliante were now suffused with lyric tension, and the daybreak that opened the third part achieved *Zarathustra*-sized levels of grandeur. By the time the orchestra had fallen in behind the snare and timpani rhythm of the concluding danse générale, all memories of the lacklustre opening third had faded, leaving only the thrill of what had somehow turned into an exciting performance.

The evening wasn't quite over. After the official programme had ended, the 12 Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic returned to the stage to perform an instrumental arrangement (by cellist David Riniker) of Poulenc's *Figure Humaine*. Mr Riniker's version, although confined to the range and timbre of a single instrument, was remarkably successful; without Éluard's words, one was left with an even greater appreciation of the intricacies in Poulenc's twelve-part writing, as well as the emotional force that resided in the music alone. The arrangement, articulated by the 12 Cellists with a great sense of movement and detail, measured favourably against its vocal counterpart, and provided the evening with a perfect coda.