

Opening Night: Contrasts

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The beginning of the new concert season in Berlin follows a well-established script: sometime around the end of August, when the festivals are wrapping up and the summer holidays are nearing their end, the Berlin Philharmonic lays out its red carpet for what is often an evening of exceptional music. This year's concert did not diverge outwardly from the formula and, indeed, the only clue that the evening marked the beginning of Sir Simon Rattle's final season as the orchestra's Chief Conductor lay in the programming: even by the standards of the Berlin Philharmonic, their monumentally-scaled performance of Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* seemed an uncommonly grand way to open a season.

The evening began, however, with the world première of a more compact work by Georg Friedrich Haas, the aptly titled *ein kleines symphonisches Gedicht* (bearing the dedication 'for Wolfgang'). In several other works – both the opera *Morgen und Abend* and a delightful *concerto grosso* for alphorn quartet have received excellent recent performances in Berlin – Mr Haas has used time as an essential element, creating a particular grandeur from slowly unfolding shifts in tone and texture. At a mere seven minutes, the *Gedicht* was of necessity more concentrated, but it packed considerable drama into its brief duration. The clouds of high strings, the uneasy throbbing of the trombones and the titanic full-orchestra swells were all accounted for, but they were woven here into a work of restless contrasts. Each instrument or group seemed to have an unusually sharp edge; instead of merging into a totality of sound, the incisive basses, the fearful horns and even the crisp timpani all seemed to exist in strange opposition to one another. Yet near the very end, something close to a resolution emerged in the form of an uneasy melody in the brass and a controlled ascent from the full orchestra that reached a tremendous climax before falling abruptly into complete silence.

The contrasts in Mr Haas' *Gedicht* seemed reasonably sedate compared to those in the evening's performance of *Die Schöpfung*. Over the past few years, Sir Simon has programmed a number of Haydn's symphonies, often in the opening slot of the evening, and the performances have been lean, rhythmically taut and classically proportioned. For *Die Schöpfung*, however, he presented a vision of Haydn as the great proto-romantic,

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Philharmonie.
Georg Friedrich
Haas: ein kleines
symphonisches
Gedicht. Joseph Haydn: Die Schöpfung.
Elsa Dreisig, soprano. Mark Padmore,
tenor. Florian Boesch, baritone.
Rundfunkchor Berlin. Berlin Philharmonic.
Sir Simon Rattle, conductor



placing a large orchestra and choir in the service of equally grand gestures. On this evening the work's central opposition between form and chaos was brought to vivid, sometimes jarring life in a performance that sought the greatest possible distance between quiet and loud, fast and slow, bass and treble, even sound and silence.

While there were a handful of volatile passages that might have thrown listeners accustomed to a more even-keel approach to Haydn, there were also numerous moments of unbridled enthusiasm and well-fashioned sublimity. The dense sound of the larger orchestra allowed Sir Simon to take the introduction at a very slow pace with no real loss of tension. Although the strings at full power somewhat overshadowed the dissonant horns that Haydn used to suggest the terror of chaos, the hushed final moments before the opening line were breathtaking. Not all of the evening's interpretive decisions worked equally well: the trio at the end of part one seemed all the more oddly paced in light of the sudden acceleration into the final chorus, and the creation of the animals sounded somewhat piecemeal. But the evening's finest moments – and there were many – had an unmistakable energy.

Tenor Mark Padmore was an extraordinary evangelist in the Berlin Philharmonic's series of Bach *Passions* a few years ago, but his declamatory fervour was possibly even better suited to the old testament (via Milton and Swieten) setting of Haydn's oratorio. His ecstatic 'und Gott scheid das Licht von der Finsternis' left no doubt about the magnitude of the miracle, and his subsequent recitatives – especially the accompanied passage before the conclusion of part one, and the idyllic evocation of the newly created world that opens the third part – were presented not just with persuasive zeal, but with a palpable investment of belief. The phrasing of his arias was never less than elegant, but he was at his most electrifying in his passages of narration.

Florian Boesch seemed to flourish among the high contrasts and deliberate pacing of Sir Simon's direction, crafting gorgeous pianissimo lines that hung delicately in the charged spaces created by the orchestra. His arias had a smooth assurance with just the right amount of authority, and his recitatives – notably the creation of the animals in part two – had an animation that verged on theatrical. Only in the second of the two Adam and Eve duets did he adopt a severity that seemed at odds with the prevailing joy of the moment. The soprano Elsa Dreisig was a late replacement for the indisposed Genia Kühmeier, but she seemed wholly comfortable with even the work's most florid passages. One may be used to hearing the Gabriel arias performed with a more pronounced mildness, but the earthy excitability in Ms Dreisig's opening aria – especially the exclamations of 'Des Schöpfers Lob' – was undeniably thrilling, and the aria at the beginning of the second part was full of stately elegance.

The performance of the Rundfunkchor Berlin was very much in keeping with Sir Simon's monumental conception of the work: while the fulsome 'Licht' in the opening section threatened to overwhelm the orchestra, the choral conclusion to Uriel's subsequent aria was an example of the evening at its most magnificent. Sir Simon may not have been interested in giving us a safe or conservative version of Haydn's great oratorio and there were a few moments when the sheer exuberance of the choir and orchestra left little room for finer detail; but when the various components of the performance locked into perfect

balance, the results were bracing. After two quiet months of summer, the evening was a promisingly energetic start to the new season.

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