

Twentieth Century Extremes

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The Biennale of the Berlin Philharmonic – a mid-February concert series with a focus on post-war modernism and, in particular, the works of György Ligeti – opened the previous week with a programme that surrounded two of Ligeti’s most essential orchestral scores, *Lontano* and *Atmosphères*, with impressionistic ocean-themed works from earlier in the century. If the second orchestral programme, which placed Ligeti’s *Requiem* in the company of works by Bernd Alois Zimmermann and Bohuslav Martinů, was arguably less conceptual in its plan, it was considerably more cohesive as both an evening of music and an evocation of twentieth-century extremes. While the programme had originally been intended as a guest appearance for Sir Simon Rattle, Matthias Pintscher, who took over after Sir Simon was forced to withdraw, directed electrifying performances that cut to the essence of each of the evening’s highly diverse works.

The programme’s opening half consisted of two relative rarities; indeed, according to the programme booklet, the evening marked the first time that either work had been performed by the Berlin Philharmonic. The first, Zimmermann’s *Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu*, was an especial delight, a work which hid a wealth of ingenuity beneath its seemingly irreverent façade. Even before the music had started, one was confronted with the unusual disposition of the orchestra. Occupying centre stage were full brass and woodwind sections, and behind them five or six percussionists; conventional strings were limited to a group of four double-basses ... but to the left of the stage were a harp, three guitarists (who doubled on electric guitars and mandolin), another bassist, a clarinet and a saxophone who, together, formed a kind of independent jazz band who played with (and occasionally against) the main orchestra. In case that wasn’t enough, there were also parts for piano and organ.

Although each of the brief movements bore a title relating to the characters of Jarry’s play, the music emerged as a parody of the baroque dance suite, with grotesque rhythms and strident phrases quickly losing their dignity at the hands of the jazz players (and the organist, whose profane intrusions from such a lofty instrument were one of the delights of

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Zimmermann:

Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu.

Martinů: Rhapsody-Concerto for Viola and
Orchestra. Ligeti: Requiem. Amihai Grosz,
viola. Makeda Monnet, soprano.

Donatienne Michel-Dansac, mezzo-
soprano. Rundfunkchor Berlin. Berlin
Philharmonic. Matthias Pintscher,
conductor

the first movement). The work would have been enormously entertaining even as an extended musical joke, but it was elevated consistently by both the quality of its thematic material and the subtly wielded skill of its orchestration. Beneath the dominant mood of gleeful anarchy was a wealth of disciplined craftsmanship.

Mr Pintscher and the orchestra approached the work with a delight they made no attempt to hide. If the side-band were responsible for the most unhinged music, the double basses, often playing at the uppermost limit of their instruments, gave performances of great virtuosity in the penultimate movement, and the percussionists were rarely allowed to sit idle, filling empty spaces in the music with all manner of unconventional noises. However, there was nothing in the first six movements to prepare one for the finale, in which an ominous martial beat from the drums and piano inexplicably gave way to distorted quotations from *Die Walküre* and the *Symphonie Fantastique*, which sounded less like stray leaves of sheet music that had accidentally found their way onto the music stands than pieces of tape spliced expertly into the music in progress. While collage and quotation became common ingredients in the arsenal of many late-twentieth-century artists, the precision with which Mr Pintscher and the orchestra executed these sudden intrusions of Wagner and Berlioz showed that such techniques have not entirely lost their power to provoke and delight.

After the constant irreverence of the Zimmermann, the programme's second piece – Martinů's *Rhapsody-Concerto* for Viola and Orchestra – provided the evening with a small dose of conventional beauty. Although the work, written in 1952, contains just enough snare drum taps and odd harmonic flights to remind us that it was indeed composed in the twentieth century, it was a work of romantic sensibility that maintained a quiet, pastoral mood through much of its duration. Even the passages of greater rhythmic intensity that gave the second movement its edge could not dispel the work's essentially agreeable nature.

Violist Amihai Grosz brought a tone of great warmth and depth to the solo part. While he seemed perfectly at ease with the work's most highly charged sections, it was the lyrical phrasing of the rapturous lower-lying passages that made the greatest impression. Yet for Mr Grosz, the concerto was only the beginning: as an encore he performed one of Martinů's *Madrigals* for Violin and Viola, for which he was joined by concertmaster Noah Bendix-Balgley. The brief piece, a fast-paced dialogue of dovetailing lines and frenetic rhythms, was played with such incisive skill and vivacious humour that it stood among the highlights of the evening.

The second half of the evening was devoted to Ligeti's *Requiem*, a work that dates from the same creative streak in the mid-1960s that yielded *Atmosphères* and *Lontano*, the second *String Quartet* and the unaccompanied choral masterpiece *Lux Aeterna*. While the *Requiem* draws on all of those works in its moods and textures, the starkly dramatic *Sequentia*, although devoid of humour, offers hints of the apocalyptic visions that Ligeti would explore the following decade in his opera *Le Grand Macabre*. Indeed those hints can be found not merely in the acrobatic treatment of the solo voices, but in the structure itself: it opens with the usual introduction and Kyrie, but gets only as far as the day of judgement. One may ask why Ligeti didn't set the rest of the *Requiem* text, but the answer is implicit in

the music: the work describes a suffering that can no longer be redeemed by an Agnus Dei, with glimpses of eternal light, or pleas for deliverance.

While the Introitus contains choral and instrumental writing of great complexity, it remains disarmingly quiet. The basses of the Rundfunkchor, paired with muted trombones, and the altos, paired with muted trumpets, sang nothing as conventional as a line, but held sustained clusters from which the outlines of Latin syllables were only barely perceptible. Both soprano Makeda Monnet and mezzo Donatienne Michel-Dansac were able to emerge from and blend seamlessly back into the massed voices choir, creating the impression of the music (if not the text) coming briefly into focus before becoming blurred again; but even when the vocal parts were passed to the front of the stage the music remained hushed and highly concentrated. The Kyrie, dominated by subtly overlapping choral phrases, was even better, starting from a similarly quiet place but soon building to a captivating frenzy of stillness.

In the Sequentia, Ligeti temporarily abandoned his vast drifting blocks of sound in favour of sharply delineated moments of extreme drama. Both the orchestra and choir under the guidance of Mr Pintscher tackled the movement's technical demands with extraordinary precision, but it was the solo voices that provided the day of judgement with its heightened theatrical flavour. Ms Michel-Dansac was frequently called upon to explore the upper- and lowermost limits of her vocal range – which she did with consistent conviction and poise – while Ms Monnet's performance, with its difficult leaps and sudden starts and stops, was a master-class in advanced technique.

After the volatile events of the third movement, the concluding Lacrimosa – which returned to the muted horns, sustained low notes and quiet singing of the introduction – seemed unsettlingly calm, a moment of reprieve perhaps, but hardly one of reassurance. Yet there was something very fitting in the sense of uncertainty that brought the evening to a close: in prefacing the Requiem with works of absurd humour and pastoral grace, the concert had been able to capture some of the contradictions of a century formed from equal parts greatness and horror, and one in which unpredictability was the only constant.