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Michail Jurowski, 29.08.-05.09.2009 Orchestra Berlin Sinfonietta

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SEEN AND HEARD UK CONCERT REVIEW

Nielsen, Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich: Akiko Suwanai (violin), BBC National Orchestra of Wales, / François-Xavier Roth (conductor), St. David's Hall, Cardiff, 3.4.2009 (GPu)

Nielsen, Maskerade - Overture

Tchaikovsky, Violin Concerto

Shostakovich, Symphony No. 10

This concert marked the Cardiff debut of François-Xavier Roth as Associate Guest Conductor of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. He joins a strong line up of conductors: Thierry Fischer (Principal Conductor), Jac Van Steen (Principal Guest Conductor) and Tadaaki Otaka (Conductor Laureate). Winner of the Donatella Flick Conducting Competition in 2000, Roth studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Alain Marion and Janos Fürst. He has worked extensively with the London Symphony Orchestra and the Ensemble Intercontemporain, as well as being Associate Conductor of the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and Principal Guest Conductor of the Navarra Symphony Orchestra. In September of this year he will become Music Director of the Orchestre Philharmonique de Liège. With the orchestra Les Siècles, which he founded in 2003 and which contains many of the best young French orchestral musicians he has conducted music of many kinds and styles, with very considerable success. A concert they gave as part of the City of London Festival in July of 2007 prompted Bayan Northcott to begin his review thus: "It takes a remarkable orchestra to switch in a moment from period instruments and stylish baroque performance practices to modern instruments and virtuoso avant-garderie. It takes an equally remarkable conductor to alternate between beating on a tambour like a latter-day Lully and directing with the fingertip finesse of a Boulez. Les Siècles, founded in 2003, is such an orchestra, and François-Xavier Roth such a conductor, and their UK debut in Middle Temple Hall as part of the City of London Festival's French strand was a delight from beginning to end" (*The Independent*, 4th July 2007). His already extensive experience, musical intelligence and wide tastes should make him a real asset to the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, and this first Cardiff concert was an auspicious debut which held the promise of much fine music-making to come.

The evening began with a performance of the overture to Nielsen's 1906 opera *Maskerade*, a performance conducted and played with all the vivacity the music requires, full of scurrying rhythms and orchestral colour. Roth brought out well the way in which the music is often characterised by a kind of layering of orchestral colours one on top of another (mask upon mask?); the sense of dance, of the anticipation of the opera's masked ball, was everywhere evident and the reading had a wit and grace that did justice to Nielsen's writing.

The soloist in the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto was Akiko Suwanai, who initially came to fame in 1990 as the youngest ever winner of the violin prize in the Moscow International Tchaikovsky Competition and has since gone on to a distinguished career on the stage and in the studio. Playing a beautiful instrument - no less than the 'Dolphin' Stradivarius of 1714 which was once owned by Jascha Heifetz - she certainly produced some exquisite sounds, especially in her pianissimo work, ravishingly sweet and delicate. All of Suwanai's work was elegant and fluent and there was an expressive lyricism to much of her playing in the first movement, in which Roth's accompaniment was sensitive and well-judged, the control of dynamics precisely judged. Suwanai had a few momentary difficulties (of the most minor kind) in the hectic close of this opening movement, but not in ways that mattered greatly. She brought a beautiful fragility and vulnerability (while remaining technically assured and confident) to her playing of the central Canzonetta, in which the playing of the woodwind section was of a high order and the interplay of soloist and orchestra was just about all that one could hope for. A certain emotional substance was evident, though not of the over-inflated kind with which some performances invest this movement. The closing Allegro was certainly 'vivacissimo', as marked; this was a performance full of excitement, the rapid early runs being particularly well handled by the soloist. Roth's rhythms were light-footed and full of intimations of the dance. The whole had an attractive air of freshness about it, pleasingly devoid of any sense of the 'routine'.

The performance, in refusing any kind of overblown romanticism, served to remind one of the qualities Tchaikovsky praised in Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole*, which he and his friend, the violinist Joseph Kotek played together in March of 1878, the time of the concerto's composition. Tchaikovsky said of Lalo's work that "he ... does not strive after profundity, but he carefully avoids routine, seeks out new forms, and thinks more about musical beauty than about observing established traditions, as do the Germans'. The composition of the concerto, as is well known, effected a kind of 'release' for Tchaikovsky in the aftermath of his disastrous marriage and the ensuing breakdown. Wondering at times whether he had lost all power to compose, Tchaikovsky suddenly found the music flowing again with speed and seeming facility.

Another kind of release lay behind the final work in this well-planned programme. The dates of Shostakovich's first ten symphonies form an interesting and revealing pattern: 1923-5, 1927, 1929, 1935, 1937, 1939, 1941, 1943, 1945 and 1953. The one substantial gap, obviously enough, is between the ninth and the tenth, between 1945 and 1953. It was in the years after 1945 that Shostakovich was declared an Enemy of the People, guilty of the crime of formalism and removed from the teaching positions he held and in many other ways was subjected to various strategies of humiliation. Stalin died on March 5th 1953. While Shostakovich was far too intelligent to imagine that one man's death (even if was the death of *that* man) would put the world to rights, Stalin's death did certainly facilitate some kind of 'release' for the composer. The Tenth symphony followed. While it is surely wrong – because needlessly limiting and reductive – to 'read' the symphony in purely political or ideological terms, it is also mistaken to ignore the historical and social context. In the broadest terms they determine its 'meaning' (or at any rate an important dimension of its meaning). Just as Margaret Thatcher famously told us that society did not exist; so Stalinism effectively declared that the individual did not exist. Amongst other things Shostakovich's tenth passionately affirms that the individual *does* exist, and that (s)he continues to exist despite all of Stalin's efforts' – hence the importance of the motif DSCH motif (i.e. D-E flat-C-B natural, the letter-names, in German, of the composer's initials) and of its 'partner' motif 'Elmira' (the notes E-A-E-D-A constituting, in a convenient mixture of French and German spellings of the notes the name E-La-Mi-Ré-A), with its reference to Elmira Nazirova, Shostakovich's composition pupil and 'muse' in these years.

From the bleak, yet paradoxically compassionate, opening bars of this performance one sensed that we were in good hands. The air of death and pain in the opening movement was palpable and powerful, but just as marked was the music's refusal to wallow in grief, its determination to speak of a kind of stoic resolution to carry on, even, if possible to move forwards. The contribution of the solo clarinet (Robert Plane) was richly expressive, as was the flute (Andrew Nicholson) with its grim, quasi-Beckettian, attempt at the dance. The movement's central climax was articulated with both power and meticulous attention to detail, an eloquent statement of the music's remarkable capacity to transcend all supposed boundaries between the public and the private; the final lapse into the plaintive complaint of two piccolos was emotionally ambiguous, as it looked back over a movement which begins in mourning and finds its way to a qualified kind of mourning, via anger and defiance. It was the second movement which Solomon Volkov claimed to have been described, by the composer, as "a musical portrait of Stalin, roughly speaking". Better, surely, to think (since we have to use words!) as a kind of apotheosis of Russian dance heightened to the point of near hysteria, full of fierce energy, densely angry – as much a release of that long-suppressed anger as a 'portrait' of Stalin and *his* destructive energy; this is energy beginning to make things again. Percussion and brass, in particular, distinguished themselves in this movement, but the orchestra's work as a whole was of a high order and Roth's control of the movement altogether exemplary. The allegretto third movement opened with a degree of grace and gentleness in startling contrast to what had gone before. The personal motifs are prominent here, but this is not quite the music of 'love', even if it does express areas of feeling not previously explored in the symphony – those feelings of intimacy between individuals, of real trust between individuals in a whole network of social relationships which were amongst the things which Stalinism had destroyed. They remain, in this movement, as in Russian society after Stalin's death, things to be aspired to, not things achieved, expressed in music like whispers after the preceding storm. In the final movement, darkness returns at the beginning, with a series of woodwind lamentations (beautifully played); when the lively clarinet patterns, picked up by the violins, seemed to be about to dispel such dark thoughts, Roth somehow contrived to make it clear that their offerings were mere self-delusion or wishful thinking and that the profound uncertainties underlying this symphony of deeply troubled hope were not so easily dispelled. The middle phase of the movement brings recapitulations – often distorted or speeded-up – of material from earlier in the symphony and such troubled and troubling matters are only partially overcome by the later insistence, in powerfully declamatory music, on the DSCH monogram, on the enduring power of the individual and his/her values, so as to allow a kind of anxious optimism at the work's close.

Especially in his tightly controlled, intelligent and passionate reading of Shostakovich's remarkable tenth symphony, but also in the high competence with which the other items on the programme were handled, François-Xavier Roth made a very favourable impression on his Cardiff debut, and patrons of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales were treated to another stimulating and satisfying concert.

Glyn Pursglove

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