

Review



François Xavier Roth
Conductor

International
Classical Artists
The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

T: +44 (0)20 7902 0520
F: +44 (0)20 7902 0530
E: info@icartists.co.uk
www.icartists.co.uk

The Guardian

By Rian Evans, 16 November 2010

Centaumomachy - review

St David's Hall, Cardiff

The appeal of Greek mythology for such composers as Harrison Birtwistle and Simon Holt is apparently endless, and the centaur – half-man, half-horse – is the inspiration for Holt's latest piece for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Further inspired by two of the orchestra's star players, the clarinettist Robert Plane and the trumpeter Philippe Scharz, Holt has conceived *Centaumomachy* as a double concerto, reflecting the dual nature of the centaur with all its ambiguities and sense of liminal being.

Holt's masterstroke is to have Scharz play the flugelhorn, which has a more silky sound than the trumpet but is almost identical in range to the clarinet. There are moments when each instrument's timbre seems to linger on the threshold of the other; together they blend into an altogether different sound quality, and yet can also contrast brilliantly. The magical and otherworldly effect befits the mythical creature.

Five titled movements invoke visual and programmatic ideas that in turn condition the tightly worked fabric of the score; the fourth, *Pitched Battle*, enacts the legendary conflict between the Centaurs and the Lapiths – the *Centaumomachy* for which the piece is named – and offers a metaphor for the centaur's internal warring, while the final movement is both eulogy and elegy for Chiron, the most superior centaur. The soloists' interplay with the orchestra is characteristically intricate, and conductor François-Xavier Roth handled it with care. Plane and Scharz realised the virtuosity effortlessly, allowing the work's core expressiveness and the feeling of an ultimately tortured superbeing to vividly emerge.

Albert Roussel's ballet *Bacchus et Ariane*, Suite No 2, had established the evening's mythological theme; Roth's equally lively and often balletic account of Sibelius's Second Symphony missed something of its intrinsic nobility.