

Review



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Musical Criticism

By Mike Reynolds, 9 January 2011

Liszt *Mazeppa*, Piano Concerto No 2; Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique*

After the Christmas festivities, most of us start the New Year in leaner and meaner mood, determined to pare down a bit. No chance of this at Thursday's Barbican concert, with a technicolour programme that saw us gorging on Liszt for the first half, and returning to a full-blown, orchestrally exhilarating account of the Berlioz that will have blown away any new listeners to the work. This was the LSO playing on top form, for a conductor they clearly like, in no-holds-barred performance of Romantic repertoire. Might the programming have been more balanced? Perhaps so. But taken on their own individual merits, all three works scrubbed up well and one left the Barbican marveling again at the sonorities, the extraordinary syncopations and the sheer daring of Berlioz opus 14.

Mazeppa is a relative stranger to the concert hall nowadays. It has the standard Liszt symphonic poem structure, a narrative of a hero against the odds, and it is a great orchestral warm-up piece, with brass and woodwind coming into their own almost from the outset. First impressions of the LSO sound were of taut, highly rhythmical chording, notes fully sounded but not held overlong and excellent balance between the sections. **Francois-Xavier Roth knew exactly what he wanted to achieve and the music sang.** That said, I found myself thinking once again that Liszt's sense of orchestration almost always falls short of the inspired: the melodic inspiration of *Mazeppa* calls for subtleties of timbre, of light and shade that are all but impossible to conjure out of the dense sound world that Liszt creates. So no orchestral masterpiece, but an original and entertaining excursion into the symphonic world of the mid nineteenth century. As the young girl once said to Britten when asked how she had enjoyed one of his works: "Oh, I didn't mind it at all".

Liszt's second piano concerto is more substantial fare and demands exactly the same approach that was taken by conductor and orchestra to *Mazeppa*. And it demands a soloist on top of his technical form. It is many years since I have heard Barry Douglas live, and I have to say that I was both impressed and excited by his playing. He produces a big, granite-like sound with his chords but has the technical facility to lighten his touch and dazzle in silvery, filigree passage work in which this concerto, like so much of Liszt's keyboard works, abounds. The biggest challenge in Liszt 2 seems to me the ability to make an organic whole of the piece - with its quicksilver changes of mood and tempo - and here Douglas was perhaps marginally less successful, exposing the sectional nature of the work more than is needed, but his account overall was full-blooded, accurately and passionately

played, and totally in rapport with the orchestral support he was given. Indeed, the interplay between soloist, orchestra and conductor gave the work a sense of enjoyment and considerable achievement. It was good to hear Liszt 2 played this well.



After the interval, a work by Berlioz that the LSO must by now have in their DNA: the Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique*. **Roth came into his element here, using his hands to craft long-breathed orchestral lines, to vary dynamics minutely at key moments, to point up (rather than smoothe over) the extraordinary quirks in the orchestration of Berlioz's iconic masterpiece.** The waltz of the second movement was taken quite fast, the forward momentum always sustained: by contrast, the adagio scene in the country occasionally dwelt a fraction long in the woodwind passages. The march to the scaffold had rhythmical bite and macabre precision - and the final movement was a sonic whirlwind, strings in their excited passage work matching huge, fat, brass and woodwind chords that shook the Barbican auditorium. The LSO's playing was at times breathtaking - a world orchestra absolutely on top of its form. The sound they produced for Roth was not always refined, but never less than exciting. And it brought the audience to its feet at the end.

So a cheery, stimulating start to the 2011 season, enlivened by a fine soloist, an orchestra and conductor demonstrating warm and close rapport with each other and an account of the Berlioz to cherish. I look forward to more from the same team.