

Bridge

Enter Spring

Blow out, you bugles

Holt

Centauromachy [BBC commission: London premiere]

Dupré

Cortège et litanie, Op.19

Saint-Saëns

Symphony No.3 in C minor, Op.78

Ben Johnson (tenor)

Robert Plane (clarinet) & Philippe Scharz (flugelhorn)

Thomas Trotter (organ)

BBC National Orchestra of Wales

François-Xavier Roth



Proms 2011 – BBCNOW/Roth – Enter Spring ... Centauromachy ... Saint-Saëns 3

Tuesday, August 09, 2011 Royal Albert Hall, London

Written by Richard Whitehouse



An Anglo-French Prom this time (neatly divided by the interval), which featured at its centre a recent piece by Simon Holt, whose *Centauromachy* (2009) draws its inspiration from the mythical battle (or should that be brawl?) between the centaurs and the Lapiths – the two factions evoked (though not represented) by clarinet in A and flugelhorn. The duo-cadenza that constitutes the initial ‘Two natures’ seemed just a little too oblique expressively, but the ensuing ‘Chiron’s dream’ brought the instruments into more sustained and meaningful interplay – enhanced by the alluring range of timbres drawn from the modest orchestra (including just one percussionist alongside timpani) – then ‘A centaur glimpsed through trees’ conjures any amount of improvisatory dialogue between the soloists (and why ever not, given their not inconsiderable jazz lineage): the pair then going their

separate ways during the evidently combative ‘Pitched battle’, before the encroaching stillness of ‘Elegeia’ is belatedly disrupted by fragmented allusions to the opening. Fluent and dedicated contributions from Robert Plane and Philippe Scharz readily commanded attention, while François-Xavier Roth summoned responsive playing from the BBC National Orchestra of Wales in one of the most engrossing among Holt’s recent works.

On either side came brief though by no means novelty items. Not the least considerable from his substantial body of songs, Frank Bridge’s setting of Rupert Brooke’s elegiac *Blow out, you bugles* (1918) seems better served in its piano guise, for all that Ben

Johnson drew no mean eloquence from within the prevailing portentousness. Nor was Marcel Dupré's *Cortège et litanie* (1921), originally for solo piano, heard to advantage in these terms – the wistful, vaguely Elgarian opening section hardly preparing one for the rather mindless onslaught of what followed, and which evinced little of the rhythmic subtlety associated with this most resourceful among French composers for organ.

Better had come, and was to come, with the works that framed the programme. Now established among his most impressive larger works, Bridge's rhapsody *Enter Spring* (1927) was given a potently characterised reading – virile and even pugnacious in its outer sections, whose Debussyan antecedents were everywhere apparent, while not lacking depth in the inward central span where the main theme emerged with appealing hesitancy before building to a rapturous climax that was outdone only by its ecstatic return during the coda. Tempting (but not necessarily accurate) to add that a British conductor might have brought out even more of the music's pastoral or landscape associations, yet this is not to deny the success of Roth's interpretation in placing this most demonstrative piece of Bridge's maturity within a recognisably European context. Has it ever received a performance in France? If not, then Roth is clearly the conductor to blaze a not unworthy trail.

Saint-Saëns's *Third Symphony* (1886) has never lacked for performances on this side of the Channel, and if this most singular of works is less a harbinger of the belated French symphonic tradition than that of César Franck, its unabashed emotional appeal and its formal ingenuity cannot be gainsaid. Pursuing a purposeful but never inflexible course through the alternately stormy and suave opening movement, Roth brought sensuousness as well as poise to its successor's heartfelt variants on a well-nigh indelible theme, before summoning capricious energy in the scherzo that opens the second half. The soul of chaste discretion in the second of these sections, Thomas Trotter duly 'pulled out the stops' in the finale. Rhythmic ingenuity aside, the latter's cloying melody, dutiful fugal sorties and grandiose peroration can be too much, but Roth's incisiveness allied to BBCNOW's trenchant response ensured that the thundering apotheosis rightly brought the house down.

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