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Passing fancies: Proms 4 & 5

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François-Xavier Roth brought his orchestra of all eras, *Les Siècles* to the Proms to play French ballet music from the 1600s to 1900s. A stellar set of players with by all accounts a wide variety of instruments at their disposal from the original performance dates. The programme started with some dazzling Lully (in which Roth conducted with a staff as Lully did) and Rameau. There is nothing tempered or academic about this orchestra's playing - it was full bodied, flamboyant and hugely attractive. I think the mark of this was how they handled *Les Sauvages* from Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* - very well known but hard not to sound like a distasteful parody. Roth ditch the savage and brought out the dance into play swinging the music along and varying the orchestration. This free flowing approach carried through to the excerpts from *Coppélia* and *Le Cid* - luscious sounds (on a different set of instruments) with a wonderful flair and style. *Panache* is I think the word, for any band and conductor that can make the Aragonese from *Le Cid* sound danceable. Sorry to say (but amused to write) that at this point they put away the *Ophicleide*.

The *Rite of Spring* was brilliant: original instruments including French Bassoon, sharper timpani and biting brass had two effects - a sound that was less string dominant and wind and brass ensembles with were more translucent so one could hear individual lines more clearly. As a reading it was unremittingly urgent - but the dance themes were evident with sprung rhythms and softer transitions. But make no mistake - this is no lightweight band and the last chord cut through the music with a force which would make the BPO blanch. Fantastic account of a score which amidst all the 100th birthday celebrations we've not heard - this was the UK premiere of the original performing version. Top notch.

More top notch playing from the Ardetti Quartet and the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra in Prom 5. Jonhan Nott visited the Proms again and with his enthusiastic band to tackle Mahler's Fifth Symphony. But before those who swoon over Mahler could get their kicks, they were challenged with 30 odd minutes of 'modern' modern music. Helmut Lachenmann's *Tanzsuite mit Deutschlandlied* - not a new piece but as challenging as you could ask for - and it's what we have come to expect from the Proms. It's fragments of sound were picked, plucked, hacked, stroked and in other ways explored by the Ardetti soloists - they were heroic. The orchestra supported them wonderfully as the peice brought the frgaments together and then degraded them again over a 35 min timescale. It will go down I think for one of those moments when I suddenly "heard" a composer's voice - these moments are treasured.

There was much mention on Twittter of "this noise" during the performance. My understanding is the difference between sound and noise is largely to do with our levels of control. It's not noise - it's sound and over that long period it becomes a piece of music in my view. There's no doubt in my mind Lachenmann's creation is on the very edges of what most people regard as music. But if we forget what we expect, notions of tunes (though there were some) and form, and just let this piece wash over us until we can discern some progress - in this case convergence, then I think it's very satisfying. Many didn't have the patience for that and given they were all lined up for Mahler's most obvious symphony one can't really be surprised that they wanted to be spoon fed tunes, harmonic and rhythmical familiarity. I'd say to them that there's not much difference between Mahler's third movement and the Lachenmann....but I don't think they would believe me.

In the very best performances of Mahler 5's Scherzo our perception of the direction of time is in question. What was in question in this performance was much less metaphysical: why was it so chaotic? Why were so many phrases rushed, uneven and obscured? How could such crafted and notated music produce a sensation of being thrown around in the back of a bus on a hot day by a grumpy driver? Why did the finale still sound like a scrappy rush for the line with brass players of such quality. I could go on - balance, phrasing, interpretation - all seemed to me to be ill-judged.

Nott is a very fine conductor of modern music and he should be proud of his advocacy and reputation. But his way

didn't work for me in Bruckner 3 in 2009 and it didn't work in this lumpy Mahler 5. Twitter was full of gushing praise but not for me, I'd save that for the Lachenmann.

Posted 20 hours ago by Stephen North

Labels: F X Roth, Rameau, Mahler, The Rite of Spring, Lachenmann, Lully, Sym No 5, Massenet, Les Siecles, Tanzsuite mit Deutschlandlied, Ardetti Quartet, Stravinsky, Le Sacre du Printemps, Jonathan Nott, Delibes