

## Alpine Horns in the Concert Hall: Worthwhile and Well Played

Germany **Berlin Musikfest 2014** – **Georg Friedrich Haas, Anton Bruckner**: Hornroh Modern Alphornquartef, SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg/François-Xavier Roth (conductor), Philharmonie, Berlin, 15.9.14 (MC)



DEU, Deutschland, Berlin, 15.09.2014, Philharmonie, Musikfest Berlin, SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg, Hornroh Modern Alphornquartett, Leitung: Francois-Xavier Roth, [(c) Kai Bienert,

**Georg Friedrich Haas**: Concerto Grosso No. 1 for Four Alpine Horns and Large Orchestra  
**Anton Bruckner**: *Symphony No. 8 in C minor (Robert Haas version)*

In the world of soccer the term ‘a game of two halves’ has become a well-worn cliché but it’s a term that could certainly apply to this concert at the Philharmonie by the SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg.

I’m not too surprised that the audience was relatively disappointing in size. There is such a number of excellent orchestras in Berlin that there has to be an exceptionally good reason why a Berlin concertgoer should chose to attend a performance by a somewhat lesser known or regarded German orchestra. Top European or American orchestras on tour are however a very different matter and create significant interest.

To open the concert there was a highly unusual work by Georg Friedrich Haas, an Austrian composer who is relatively unknown outside Austro-Germany. Haas’s work the *Concerto Grosso No. 1* for four alpine horns and large orchestra has only been performed once before and that was earlier this year in Munich. A substantial work lasting just under thirty minutes the score explores the curious relationship between the alpine horn quartet and symphony orchestra. Continuously the alpine horns were generally played in ones and two creating a substantial and most unique sound which was sustained for considerable, and increasingly as the score progressed all four of the alpine horns played together. Against this on a recurring basis the orchestra played and developed a considerable volume which then lessened in weight before stopping. Remarkable was the memorable

shimmering sound produced when all four alpine horns were playing continuously. Hearing the work so expertly performed by the *Hornroh Modern Alphornquartet* was a worthwhile experience although not one that I would wish to repeat in a hurry as I found the excessive length and repetition of the score extremely tiresome.

After the interval was the main work of the evening, Bruckner's wonderful *Symphony No. 8 in C minor* using the *Robert Haas version*, and what a substantial work it is, too! Under principal conductor François-Xavier Roth the SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg accepted the challenge of Bruckner's magnificent compositional and spiritual dimensions valiantly, playing with unequivocal commitment that certainly seemed to engage the audience. It was not long before Roth revealed his focus on extremely broad dynamics with thunderous climaxes so early on which rather took the shine off what should be the shattering effect of the culmination point in the finale. It took many of the players a while to settle down into this extremely demanding work and overall some of the playing was untidy, lacking in polish with the players audibly tiring toward the end. My highlights were the playing of the Scherzo which produced a glorious sound that rang through the hall together with a section that sounded like a haunted waltz. Although the tempo in the Adagio was a touch too measured for my taste, Maestro Roth did manage to hold everything together with reasonable cohesion and build the tension successfully. Those four Wagner tubas played so splendidly certainly added to the sense of occasion.

***Michael Cookson***