

François-Xavier Roth LSO Wagner Berg Mahler 5 Barbican

François-Xavier Roth conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in Wagner, Berg and Mahler at the Barbican, London,. All music is "modern": Monteverdi was new in his time, and Bach, and Wagner. Anyone who genuinely knows Roth's innovative work will know better than to expect cliché. This time Roth challenges assumptions in a short series the LSO calls "Beyond Romanticism: New Languages". Thus, this concert was a chance to hear Wagner, Berg and Mahler from new perspectives.

Wagner *Parsifal* in a concert hall, for example, and the Overture thereof, rather than a concert performance of the full opera. This was an opportunity to hear Wagner as symphonist, examining his music close-up, revealing its innate beauty. The music seemed illuminated, as if glowing from within, the textures so transparent and so subtle that I thought of Debussy, whose credentials as a master of the modern are as great as that of the Second Viennese School. Roth's approach suggests the "New Language" Wagner was creating in *Parsifal*, which also reflects the new beginnings *Parsifal* will bring to revive the Grail community. Over the years, *Parsifal* has attracted pseudo-religious baggage. *Please see my article Religion versus Religiosity.* Do we really want to end up like the monks whose fetish for ritual blinds them to the enlightenment that is *Parsifal*'s mission. Roth's luminous textures might not please traditionalists, but his reading was perceptive, and absolutely true to the spirit of the opera.

Roth built his career on the firm foundations of the French baroque tradition. We forget that, in their time, Lully was "new" and Rameau perceived as a dangerous radical. The connections between the baroque and the modern are very strong indeed, as are the implications for performance practice. Hence the inner discipline of Roth's style, reflecting an aesthetic that stems from Voltaire and Descartes. It's not for nothing that Roth is the most intuitive interpreter of Pierre Boulez. This intelligence informed this performance of Alban Berg's *Seven Early Songs*. Camilla Tilling, the soloist, was one of Benjamin Zander's

discoveries. She gave a good enough performance here, if a bit too subdued. This wasn't a problem because the songs are so well known, we can live with hearing them as orchestral pieces for a change. Even though there were infelicities in the playing at times, the LSO gave a thoughtful account, throwing emphasis on the orchestration.

Although Mahler *Symphony no 5* is ubiquitous, that doesn't necessarily mean that we really know it. The better a piece is, the more open it is to fresh thinking. Roth and the LSO began with an explosive, exuberant start, emphasizing the boldness of Mahler's concept. The trumpets sounded exuberantly, as if they were marching into battle. But that's part of the inner meaning of the symphony. It's scored for huge forces to lull the literal minded into thinking it's all excitement. The real excitement, though, lies in its contradictions.

This symphony is not all blast and fanfare. Indeed, Mahler premiered it in Vienna's Kleinen Musikvereinsaal, to emphasize its "Kammermusikton". Thus Roth observed the changes of dynamic, from loud and forceful, to quiet but equally potent. It's chamber music, on a big scale, but chamber music in the importance of detail. Mahler embeds within this symphony different units which function like miniature chamber ensembles. There are interlocking dialogues, between trumpet and horn, between horn and flute, solo violin and strings. The trumpet part is important, but it weaves in and out throughout, leading and tantalizing. The timpani provide much of the low, rumbling undercurrent that flows throughout the symphony, but isn't always appreciated, especially as they are played extremely quietly, easily lost in the mass of noisy performance. The "storm" theme was well articulated, the low brass and winds working together to create the image of distant thunder, or a murmur of something undefined and imperceptible.

It's significant that Mahler nearly died in 1901, while this symphony was in gestation. Indeed, the symphony was first performed with the Rückert setting, *Um Mitternacht*. In the silence of the night the poet hears his heart and realizes its beat separates life from death. Rückert places his faith in God, but for Mahler, more deist than true believer, it's more complex. The Trauermarsch in this symphony is counterbalanced by the passionate Adagietto and Finale, music of positive energy. There was some rough abandon in the playing, but all to the good, I thought, since it underlined the contrasts. Roth's conducting style is energetic - he has conducted Lully with a staff - and this gives his performances an earthy punchiness that's quite distinctive. Not that he moves a lot - he conducts with both hands, as Boulez did. Anyone can read Roth's CV off Google, but he's a very individual conductor who has to be experienced live for full effect.

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