

Excellent, Thoughtful Berg and Strauss from the LSO and François-Xavier Roth

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United Kingdom **Webern, Berg, and Strauss**: Renaud Capuçon (violin), London Symphony Orchestra, François-Xavier Roth (conductor). Barbican Hall, London, 24.1.2015. (MB)

Webern – *Im Sommerwind*

Berg – Violin Concerto

Strauss – *Ein Heldenleben*, op.40

I enjoyed this concert very much, my only cavils being the Barbican acoustic – especially at climaxes: a new hall cannot come soon enough! – and a doubtless curmudgeonly wish to have heard some more characteristic Webern. I do not think for a minute that this was the case here, *Im Sommerwind* finding its natural home with Strauss, but I cannot help but wonder whether some performances of it and, to a certain extent, of the Passacaglia, op.1, happen because they enable orchestras or conductors to have played Webern without really having done so. It is fascinating to hear Webern's 'Idyll', but mostly for the fact that it really does not sound anything like his mature *œuvre*. It seems wishful thinking to claim to detect seeds of the future, whereas there is more of a case to be made with the Passacaglia. Its originality was revealed as being quite contrary to that of later works; intriguingly, the more inept passages tend to be the more original, perhaps experiments from which he learned and which he thus never repeated. The LSO and François-Xavier Roth nevertheless relished it for what it is, producing a gloriously Straussian sound, highlighting indirectly that Webern could surely have never pursued this path, even if he had wished to do so. The sound of that extraordinary chord, though: it was worth coming to the concert for its sake alone.

From apprentice work to towering mature masterpiece, and in a reversal of preconceptions, from 'late Romantic' work and performance to something far more 'modernist': Berg's Violin Concerto, for which Renaud Capuçon joined the orchestra. Capuçon and Roth seemed very much of a similar mind, offering a highly dramatic performance, in no sense hidebound to performing tradition. Under Roth's direction, the opening – what splendidly characterful woodwind playing from the LSO! – conveyed a real sense of the post-*Wozzeck* laboratory. Berg is far more 'difficult' than he is often given credit for; as ever, we should do well not to confuse style and idea. Both conductor and orchestra offered great orchestral clarity; that enhances rather than detracts from the labyrinthine quality of Berg's invention. Indeed, both soloist and conductor conveyed a very strong sense of the Wagnerian *melos*; our thread through the labyrinth. Capuçon selected from a commendably wide palette; he can paint in silver as well as gold, which heightened the impact of the full, truly glorious 'Romantic' tone when we heard it. I loved Roth's – and the LSO's – way with the Mahlerian dance rhythms: ironic and yet affectionate. The ending of the *Allegretto* section and thus of the first part seems tricky to get right; all too often, it sounds over-emphatic, but not here. And the great contrast – how could it be otherwise? – with the *Allegro* opening of the second part was, above all, dramatically meaningful, the dazzling ferocity of Capuçon's playing very much part of that. Indeed, I cannot recall hearing this music imbued with quite such urgency. Again, the orchestral dances were wonderfully apparent, although quite rightly, they seemed to have left Mahler behind: *Lulu* came to mind, even, dare I suggest it, Stravinsky. There was for me here an unabashed modernity that truly convinced and which made the appearance of Bach all the more moving and meaningful. It was not that the work lost what we might call its 'nostalgia', but that the performance both questioned and made sense of it.

Ein Heldenleben continued the path of the first half, both enjoyable and thought-provoking. I liked the way Roth did not wait for silence; he simply turned to the orchestra and began, almost as if clicking a switch, although there was certainly nothing mechanical about what followed. This is such a difficult piece to bring off, the rest of the work all too readily overshadowed by the opening; not for one moment did that seem to be the case here. Perhaps the seeds for that actually lay in Roth's way with the opening, the 'Hero', who had swagger, to be sure, but plenty of light and shade too, also a flexibility which simply sounded right. The LSO was on splendid form throughout, heightening a growing conviction in my mind that both work and performance were essentially 'about' music and musical performance. Adversaries as piquant as one could hope for seemed to necessitate an almost Elgarian string consolation. Throughout, the orchestra could sound vividly pictorial, but never just that; under Roth's leadership, it maintained an intense, ever-changing, and yet coherent sense of musical drama. Roman Simovic's violin solos were not only technically and emotionally right. In themselves and in their orchestral context, they seemed to be telling a captivating story, even if it were a story one could not necessarily put into words, or which at the very least could not be exhausted by a programme. Just as Strauss's operas are so often about opera, here the tone-poem seemed to be about tone-poetry.

The great orchestral-phantasmagorical passages sounded, despite the acoustic, to be judged well-nigh perfectly, Strauss's materialism – this could never have been Webern's way! – relished. (How we still far too often misunderstand Strauss, his æsthetics, and his æstheticism!) The battle seemed both to have a great deal at stake musically yet also to be a game, a game, I felt, we were intended to enjoy; there were no metaphysics. Roth's shaping of the work convinced just as much as Daniel Barenboim's very different London performance had last year, the appearance of *Don Juan* sounding as properly climactic as I think I have heard, highlighting the extraordinary originality of the music that follows. Whatever the non-redemptive force might be that is hymned at the end – surely it is music! – it spoke wisely, even if, arguably particularly if, we actually believe in redemption. It was possessed of just the right sense of irony, quite without sentimentality, and thus had no need to shout its presence, nor to shout about itself.

Mark Berry