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From The Sunday Times

December 14, 2008

Saint Nicolas: Broken Britten

The violinist Gil Shaham was bold, Rattle was scholarly, but Bostridge's treatment of Britten was a travesty

Paul Driver

Last week was a glamorous one on the South Bank. Simon Rattle conducted the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in two concerts covering Schumann's four symphonies and, on consecutive nights, Pierre Boulez and the orchestra he founded, the Paris-based Ensemble Intercontemporain, brought the Southbank Centre's year-long Messiaen centenary festival to an end, then celebrated the centenary of the American composer Elliott Carter, each concert on the actual day. More of the Boulez events next week, but let us not forget that other musical centre, the Barbican. A touch of glamour there, too, in the form of the American-born, Israeli-bred violinist Gil Shaham, who was soloist in two concertos on a BBC Symphony Orchestra programme that was conducted by his brother-in-law David Robertson and opened with a work by the British composer Sam Hayden (b 1968).

Substratum was commissioned by the BBC and should have been unveiled at the 2007 Proms, but being put, as it was, beside Ives's hugely elaborate Fourth Symphony, and scarcely easier to play, it defeated even this quick-off-the-mark orchestra, and only the first 10 minutes were given on that occasion. The full 25 minutes had their premiere in a very different musical context. Immediately after the relentless unfolding of Hayden's multiple polyrhythmic layers — he uses the tutti nearly all the time, though the impacted texture is broken up by short and long pauses — came the demureness of the teenage Mozart's Violin Concerto No 2. To pass from a stringently atonal world — a sort of compound of the contrasting but unremittingly dense styles of Ferneyhough and Birtwistle — to one where the tiniest detail was radiant certainly pulled one up.

I was struck by the drivenness, the savage intellectuality, of Substratum, but longed to hear a bit more detail. Even following the score, I was hard pressed to pick out individual figuration from the melee. But Messiaen's elegant little Mozart bicentenary tribute, Un sourire, in the second half, was, like all his music, definition itself, and Stravinsky's Violin Concerto has that quality too. Shaham brought a jocular, big-toned incisiveness to his part, and the BBC woodwinds were hardly less bold and biting.

Two days earlier at the Barbican, I attended the final concert of Homeward Bound, a wide-ranging two-season series curated by the tenor Ian Bostridge. The programme was engagingly structured: the first half two Bach cantatas, brief and beautiful, undertaken by the London Handel Orchestra and Singers under Laurence Cummings, with Carolyn Sampson, Roderick Williams and, in the original plan, Bostridge as vocal soloists; the second half a semi-staged rendition of Britten's community cantata Saint Nicolas. This involved the amateur orchestra EC4 Music, LSO St Luke's Youth and Community Choirs (200 voices), the piano duettists Charles Owen and David Syrus, the organist William Whitehead and the Belcea Quartet (professionals to stiffen the orchestral forces), with Cummings again conducting and Bostridge in the title role. The director was Theresita Colledo, and the performance, it must be said, was a travesty.

Colledo has devised and interpolated into Eric Crozier's libretto a running commentary on the action, a simple survey of the saint's life that she must have felt did not hold up on its own. Perhaps afraid the piece would seem sentimental or dated (it has a certain 1948 quality), and evidently distrusting Britten's sense of theatre, she subjected us to a jokey debate between a pantomime angel and devil about the

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desirability of sanctity. The inherent dramatic power of Britten's movement sequence was constantly obscured by these slangy exchanges, and the music began to seem like a background.

It was impressive, of course, that so many local people, including young children, had participated, and the choir trainer, Gareth Malone (who gave the audience a brisk lesson in how to sing the two congregational hymns), had done a good job. He was prominent throughout, directing a mobile group of children from various positions in the hall. The magical moment when the three resurrected "pickled boys" enter with their treble alleluias survived the direction's fussiness, but the charm and "naivety" of the piece were mostly sacrificed to overemphasis.

Cummings's hectic, gabbling tempo for The Birth of Nicolas was not auspicious. That other marvellous moment, when this section's refrain, "God be glorified!", passes from the succession of child soloists to the adult voice of the saint himself, accompanied by a thunderous organ (a not much less delightful surprise than the C major explosion at "and there was Light" in Haydn's Creation, a model for Saint Nicolas), was thrown away. On top of it all, Bostridge had a bad cold and, having withdrawn from the Bach cantatas, was underpowered in the Britten, his words nowhere. The composer must surely have been turning in his splendidly unfussy Aldeburgh grave.

An "authentic" splendour attached to Simon Rattle's accounts of Schumann at the Festival Hall. This was not the first time he has explored this composer with the OAE and its period instruments on the South Bank. Five years ago, they gave the Violin Concerto and the Fourth Symphony with a clarity and force that were startling. It still seems odd to hear such canonical works played as though they were pre-classical scores whose instrumentation has to be conjectured, and the performances of the First and Third Symphonies (with Berlioz's Les Francs-Juges overture) that I caught last week were historically minded with a will. The woodwinds made some peculiar, even medieval noises. One could almost take the oboes for shawms. Flutes and clarinets in unison made an egregious farmyard sound, and the full wind ensemble, set apart in the Third Symphony, had the raw stridency of a street band.

It was a nice scholarly touch to use crooked horns for the First Symphony (1841), but valved ones for the Third (1850), by which time they would presumably have come into general use. Even the cymbals were carefully authenticated — a delectably small, soft one for the Berlioz. This was a gripping concert, intense in every bar. The drastically altered tonal balance of the symphonies — that ventilated, crackling quality — made them seem brand-new compositions on whose orchestral mastery nobody would think to cast aspersions.

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