

SINCERITY AND ECSTASY IN MUSIC THAT SOME BELIEVE TO BE DÉMODÉE

BY PIERRE-NICOLAS COLOMBAT

The concert was stunning. As I spoke with friends in the days leading up to this concert, some were enthusiastic and some rolled their eyes making jokes about how lugubrious and over the top Wagner can be. Whatever one's opinions are about Wagner, his influence is something that cannot be ignored or underestimated and the concert on March 23 in the Stadtcasino Basel gave a strong argument for the power Wagner's music still has.

The 3rd act of *Siegfried* was preceded by musical performances in the Hans Huber Saal as well as a discussion of Wagner's friendship with one of Basel's most famous historical inhabitants, Friedrich Nietzsche. All of this created great anticipation for the main course. It was a very well-conceived soirée in which the organizers clearly understood that music of such monumental nature would benefit from a bit of a warmup, especially since the concert began directly the heart of the opera.

Immediately from the off, the orchestra plunged the hall into the throes of the musical action. The quiet and calm majesty of Sir Mark Elder gave a cool center to an otherwise swirling storm. Throughout the performance, the orchestra played with utmost sensitivity and commitment to the moment. Derek Welton (Wanderer), Wiebke Lehmkuhl (Erda), Simon O'Neill (Siegfried) gave an impressive and touching account of the act's first half even if O'Neill's efforts to physically portray Siegfried's naivety seemed a bit overdone and distracting at times without the help of a full staging around him. When Rachel Nicholls (Brünnhilde) arrived on stage to be awoken Siegfried however, the performance was vaulted to another level of expression and this climax was maintained until the end. The ecstatic thrust of Nicholls' performance gave sincere legitimacy to the 19th century values of «grandeur» and big ideas that became a bit démodée after certain 20th century historical developments. The music was alive from the first note to the last and I would think that any composer would be happy with this level of commitment and execution of their work.

It is well known that Wagner specifically designed Bayreuth to suit his works and it is also well known that Wagner contributed the general enlargement of what was considered the typical size of an orchestra. Here, credit has to be given to creator of the «Gesamtkunstwerk» since he understood that no singer would be able to compete with the size of his orchestral score,

so the pit in Bayreuth is well covered by the stage. The wisdom of this decision was made apparent on Thursday night as the only critique one could make would be that balance was an issue nearly the entire night. Thankfully I benefitted from seats directly in front of the singers but even then, it was never a fair fight.

Nevertheless, the crowd reacted overwhelmingly enthusiastically, and it was well deserved. The respect and gratitude to Sir Mark Elder for being at the helm of this powerful musical wave clearly came both from the musicians on stage as well as the public in the hall.