

Alice Sara Ott's Memorable Ravel with the Basel Symphony Orchestra

 United Kingdom **Members of Les Six, Ravel, Stravinsky**. Alice Sara Ott (piano), Basel Symphony Orchestra, Dennis Russell Davies (conductor), Cadogan Hall, London, 24.9.2015 (AS)

Members of Les Six – *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*

Ravel – Piano Concerto in G

Stravinsky – *Le Sacre du Printemps*

A year or two after the First World War the Swedish Ballet Group commissioned a ballet jointly from the writer, poet, playwright and artist Jean Cocteau, and the composer Georges Auric. Cocteau conceived a bizarre scenario involving a wedding party at the Eiffel Tower in Paris, entitled *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. But seen through a photographer's lens are some bizarre happenings. For instance, the camera focuses on a little boy, who massacres guests in order to eat some macaroons on the banquet table. Order is restored, but then a lion comes in and eats one of the guests. Finally the photo is taken and the wedding celebration ends.

Auric fell behind with his composing, so Cocteau drafted in four other members of the Satie-inspired group of composers known as Les Six in order to help (the sixth, Louis Durey, pleaded illness). And so Francis Poulenc wrote two numbers, Germaine Tailleferre contributed two, there were also two from Darius Milhaud and one from Arthur Honegger – in addition to Auric's two completions. Later Poulenc described the music, excluding Auric's "Ouverture", but surprisingly including his own pieces, by using a highly derogatory term that can't be repeated in this review.

The ballet has received two recordings, including one conducted by Milhaud, but it is understandably a very rare concert item, for it is certainly not a great collection musically. Milhaud's compositional fingerprints are easily recognised, Honegger's *Marche funèbre* is not without merit, but the star of the show is, surprisingly, Mme Tailleferre. This somewhat disparate collection was played enthusiastically but rather raggedly by the Basel orchestra.

In the Ravel concerto the orchestral playing suddenly became first-rate. This was fortunate, since Alice Sara Ott deserved nothing but the best. Hers was a brilliant, technically superlative performance of the first movement, but it was one where thought and feeling were very much in evidence, for there was a slight vein of melancholy mixed in with the high spirits. Even finer was Ott's playing in the central nocturne-like movement, which she took at the marked *Adagio assai* tempo, rather than *Allegro assai*, as incorrectly indicated in the concert programme. The beauty of her phrasing was exceptionally sensitive, and her tone colouring was exquisite. A superbly virtuosic account of the final Presto, yet one that was still imbued with plenty of expression, rounded off an ideal interpretation.

And so to *Le Sacre*. It wasn't to be expected that the Basel Symphony Orchestra would provide a standard of playing equal to that of the greatest ensembles in the world, but it was still pretty good: in fact it was a change to hear the work treated not as a display piece, as sometimes happens in these days of exceptional orchestral standards, but as a dramatic ballet score. I've never heard the Russian folk melodies brought out so clearly and poignantly, and even the violent passages of the score had the smell and atmosphere of the theatre. Dennis Russell Davies was a calm, sure-footed guide through the work's complexities, and the final 'Danse sacrée', taken at a measured tempo, evoked images of a chosen virgin dancing herself to death with unusual sharpness. It was a pity that the concert was so poorly attended.

