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SEEN AND HEARD UK CONCERT REVIEW

Turnage, Philip Glass and Górecki: Joanna Woś (soprano), Robert McDuffie (violin) London Philharmonic Orchestra, Marin Alsop, Royal Festival Hall, London, 17.4.2010 (BBr)**Mark-Anthony Turnage:** *Texas Tenebrae* (2009) (UK première)**Philip Glass:** Violin Concerto No.2, *The American Four Seasons* (2009) (European première)**Henryk Mikolaj Górecki:** *Symphony No.3, Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*, op.36 (1976)

This was an interesting programme from the LPO, starting with a new piece by its Composer in Residence. *Texas Tenebrae* is a short work, showing all of the usual Turnage fingerprints in both content and sound – he uses his favourite soprano saxophone to advantage. But it doesn't show us anything new about Turnage; this piece is an offshoot of his forthcoming opera based on the life of Anna Nicole Smith – to be premiered at Covent Garden on 17th February next year – and as such it felt as if he was treading water rather than moving forwards. This, however, can be no bad thing – a composer occasionally needs to sit back and take stock. So whilst we don't have another *Three Screaming Popes* we do have a kind of interlude – but one which still protests and attacks. Because of this, it might prove difficult to programme as it is too short for one really to get to grips with, and the gestures are rather too big for the size of the piece.

In four movements, each preceded by a solo for the violin, and scored for a small string orchestra and synthesizer, Philip Glass's new *Violin Concerto* playing for a little over half an hour, pleased a capacity house, his fans giving it a standing ovation, as they enjoyed more of the same that he has been giving them for many years. The first two movements were slow and we were re-introduced to the never ending split triad, and the quaver movement so well known from *Facades* (1982) – this really is an old friend. The other two movements were fast in intent but slow in progress – just because you write some quick notes for the bass, it doesn't mean the music is fast, especially when the harmonic change is very slow. The problem is that we've heard it all before from Glass, and heard it far too often. This composer has failed to grow and develop as he has gained recognition and success, seeming to be content to repeat himself. This *Concerto* is filled with clichés at best and at worst with banality. The solo part did away with display as the soloist went up a scale, then back down, played some octaves and meandered around. There is no memorable melodic material, except that which we already knew, and although this wasn't a *Concerto* where man (the soloist) is pitted against the beast (the orchestra) it wasn't much of a dialogue either. Robert McDuffie, for whom the work was written, had committed the piece to memory: I have little doubt that he is proud of "his" *Concerto*, and will be giving many performances of it in the future, but I do feel that his time would be better spent with a major American Violin *Concerto*, such as those by Roy Harris and Lou Harrison, to name but two which are certainly more deserving musically of a hearing than this lack lustre and dull affair.

Illness had caused Górecki to be unable to complete the 4th *Symphony*, whose première had been promised for tonight, so, instead, the sensible choice was made to give his 3rd *Symphony* in its place. This *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* has been a hit parade favourite and part of the second movement has been used in a TV advertisement, the former being a pleasant surprise, the latter somewhat insulting. This work is a lament, almost a religious rite, which takes its time to unfold its message and, as the composer takes us on quite a journey, we are enriched by the experience. Described as the first minimalist *Symphony*, Górecki's 3rd is certainly an unusual creature. The scoring for an orchestra without oboes, trumpets and percussion gives it a dark feeling, even the flutes don't really sparkle, and with the solo soprano singing words of lamentation or lost hope, this would seem to create a work of some depression. Perhaps surprisingly, this work is truly uplifting and the emotional punch is huge.

Two things made this performance something special. First of all, Alsop's direction – here is a conductor who is never prone to sentimentality, this work could so easily descend into self pity – was tight, and she kept the music moving, never allowing unnecessary rubato or trying to create a big gesture – this simply isn't that kind of work. Secondly, soprano Joanna Woś was part of the ensemble, not a soloist as such, for here the voice is the voice of mankind and it must grow from the texture, and not be apart from it. Even at its most passionate the music is not of an operatic nature – too many recordings have been spoiled by the use of a big operatic voice sounding as if they were singing an aria from *Tosca* or some such verismo work. Woś held back, in the second movement making me believe I really was listening to the voice of the 18 year old Polish girl who had been incarcerated by the Gestapo, whose words Górecki set. All in all, this was an incandescent performance of a rather misunderstood work. Before the performance, Alsop asked that we withhold our applause at the end and observe a silence in memory of the 96 victims of the Polish air crash of 10 April – the concert was dedicated to their memory – but in truth this would have happened as a matter of course for this is not music which makes one want to stand up and shout; it is about closure and reflection, remembrance and the fragile nature of life itself. All of this was conveyed to us in a performance of noble solemnity, and deep devotion.

BBC Radio 3 will be broadcasting this concert on the evening of Wednesday 21 April, and it will be available on their iPlayer (archive) for a week thereafter. I think that it is too good to miss.