

Konzertchor Harmonie Zurich Showcases Interesting Rarities

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Beethoven, Schumann, Elgar: Roswitha Müller (soprano), Andreas Winkler (baritone), Manuel Walser (baritone), Konzertchor Harmonie Zürich, Orchestra of Europe / Peter Kennel (conductor). Tonhalle Maag, Zurich, 27.10.2018. (JR)



Beethoven – Overture *King Stephen* Op.117

Schumann– *Der Königssohn* Op.116

Elgar – *The Black Knight* Op.25

The Konzertchor Harmonie Zürich (known hereabouts simply as 'Harmonie') is one of Zurich's best lay choirs and can trace its roots right back to 1841. Cleverly titling their concert 'The Crown', they clearly and successfully cashed in on the current popularity of the eponymous Netflix series, which is avidly watched in Switzerland. Each of their three works in this concert had royal connections.

Beethoven's *King Stephen* opened the concert. Beethoven wrote nine overtures in all, not counting the various *Leonore* versions. *King Stephen* was written for the opening of a theatre in Pest (part of today's Budapest) in 1812. August von Kotzebue had written a melodrama describing the foundation of the Hungarian Kingdom in the year 1000 by King Stephen I. Aptly, in Greek Stephen means 'crown' or 'the crowned'. Not unnaturally, the piece is predominantly jovial and festive, with occasional Hungarian influences. The orchestra for the evening, frequently rather subsidiary to the choir, was the Orchestra of Europe, formed in 2011 by Peter Kennel (the Harmonie's conductor for over ten years) and Astrid Leutwyler, who still leads the first violins. Leutwyler was for many years Concertmaster of the Gustav Mahler Jugendorchester and her aim was to found an orchestra which would be a natural first step once members of the GMJO has reached their not very lofty 'retirement' age. Consequently, their members are young(ish), come from all over Europe and are musically very gifted, now often playing with Europe's top orchestras. Their sound is full, ensemble impeccable and most Principals highly accomplished. The oboist and Principal cellist stood out, the whole team blended very well and they played with gusto, responding well to the conductor's vigorous directions.

After the Beethoven, we turned to Schumann, his *Königssohn*, the first of three ballads following texts by Ludwig Uhland. It describes the journey of a king's son who sets off to found his own kingdom. The work foreshadows Schumann's later prowess and is clearly fun for the choir to sing, each register is given lengthy sections to sing on their own. The ladies duly charmed us in the second section as the king's son sets off across the sea; he encounters a storm and Schumann's use of the piccolo evokes the shrill winds of the *Flying Dutchman*. In scene 4 the ladies start; in scene 5 the men only, first basses then the tenors. There are plenty of dramatic passages and some jaunty ones. An enjoyable work all round.

The three soloists were variable. I was much taken by the baritone, Manuel Walser, who recently stepped in for an indisposed Matthias Goerne at a concert in Israel under Manfred Honeck, Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. Roswitha Müller is a known quantity (and quality) in Zurich. Andreas Winkler had an off night, struggling with his top register and his volume insufficient lower down.

Elgar's *Black Knight* is based on 'Der schwarze Ritter' by Ludwig Uhland. Henry Longfellow translated it into English. Elgar wrote this work in 1889 at the end of his honeymoon, it premiered a few years later in Worcester as part of the Three Choirs Festival and was a success. It has since, of course, been overshadowed by his other choral works, particularly *The Dream of Gerontius*. Today, *The Black Knight* is rarely performed, especially outside Britain, but it does not need to hide its light under a bushel.

The story tells of the Scottish King Alexander the Third, around 1285. The action takes place at Whitsuntide (Pentecost). A knight dressed in black armour appears but refuses to give his name, there is a fight, the sky darkens, the Royal castle and the Royal family are destroyed: sound familiar, Wagner-lovers?

The score is unmistakably Elgarian, starting with some pomp and circumstance; in scene 2 there was the first draft of the Demons' Chorus from *Gerontius*. There was even a declamatory 'Take me, too' clearly foreshadowing Gerontius's 'Take me away!'

There was no doubting that the choir gave their all. They claim to be 100 in number on a good day; I counted around 80. All registers were firm, intonation and rhythm sound; I would have liked more volume from the tenors at times but that was due to numbers not individual quality. Most amateur choirs suffer a dearth of tenors, particular young ones with strong voices. English diction was good, especially on the word 'the', but with the occasional lapse (there is no 'r' in 'iron, 'aghost' was just ghastly).

The orchestra continued to make a very good impression, but all eyes and ears were on the choir.

The Harmonie tend to shy away from mainstream works, leaving those to other choirs, concentrating on lesser known, less frequently performed works. Their next concert, next June, for example, will be Louis Spohr's oratorium *Die letzte Dinge*. Thanks again to the Harmonie for unearthing these rarities and performing them to such a high standard.

John Rhodes