Concert at City Hall Sheffield, 14 March 2024

China Shenzhen Symphony Orchestra
Daye Lin Conductor
Tamsin Waley-Cohen violin
Jiapeng Nie cello

Programme
TAN DUN Excerpts from Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
CHAUSSON Poème, Op.25
MAHLER Symphony No.1

It was a promising start. Tan Dun's vivid and exotic score from "Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon" demonstrated an unfamiliar and percussive use of the orchestra. If I didn't know it was a film score I'd probably have guessed. This atmospheric, sometimes savage music was contrasted with a welcome discovery for me; the porcelain-delicate and civilised Chausson Poème with its shades of Debussy and Brahms, skilfully interpreted by violin soloist Tamsin Waley-Cohen.

I wouldn't argue with the programme's assertion that the orchestra are noted for their excellent playing. They are indeed a well-drilled machine. They played the notes with admirable clarity, precision and ensemble; however when it came to the Mahler I felt that something was missing.

The tempo was steady with a lack of the subtle ritardandos that we expect or rather take for granted in Mahler. There was a general flattening of dynamics, and time and again when I expected a ritardando or an individual interpretation there was none. The Frère Jacques movement seemed to lack the anticipated irony. Perhaps this orchestra just doesn't "get" Mahler? Admittedly Mahler isn't to everyone's taste, and perhaps most of the audience, less familiar with this symphony than I am, wouldn't have noticed. Possibly some might even prefer this "classical" interpretation of a Late Romantic piece. There seemed to be two missing elements throughout the performance … the passion, and the performers' identification with Mahler's sound-world. It may be that the orchestra hadn't identified with Mahler the man, who is inseparable from his music and his central European background. The human dimension appeared to be lacking.

Toward the end of the 4th movement there was an increased dynamic and more activity from the conductor, but much perspiration alone doth not a great performance make. I'm not convinced that this Mahler would have won any converts. Mahler wears his heart on his sleeve. He just doesn't DO inscrutable.

It may be an indication of how factors that we take for granted in one culture can go completely under the radar in another, and what makes the (sometimes subtle) difference between an acceptable reading and a great performance. The culture gap and difference in mindset were never so apparent as here. However this is a young orchestra with a young conductor and time is on their side.

It's something like comparing Sheku Kanneh-Mason's excellent 2019 Proms performance of the Elgar Cello Concerto with that of the immortal Jacqueline du Pré, the gold standard against which all performances of this work are judged. Perhaps it's necessary to experience something like this to appreciate on a gut level what Mozart meant when he said, "The music is not in the notes but in the silence between".

For GMS UK, our visit to Sheffield was successful. Trisha Cooper, Chair of Sheffield Music Academy, met us before the pre-concert talk, which concentrated on the other two items on the programme, with Tamsin Waley-Cohen and cellist Jiapeng Nie, rather than the Mahler 1. We were pleased to see her again - we first met her in 2023 when members travelled from Wales, the Midlands and London for the Classical Sheffield concert, when two orchestras and two choirs performed Mahler Symphony No. 2.

During this year's talk, Trisha pointed out the GMS presence in the audience. In the foyer were our Society banner and flyers, informing the audience of our forthcoming events and providing a useful focus for our conversation with the audience.

While the auditorium was not completely full, we did have the opportunity to meet and talk with some of the audience - mainly after the concert - which I think was appreciated.

Many thanks to Trisha and the other members of staff at Sheffield for giving us the opportunity to spread the word.

Penny Young
14.3.24.