

***Le Freischuetz* at the Proms**

The second last event of this year's BBC Proms (9 September 2011) was a semi-staged performance of the 1841 French version of *Der Freischütz* with recitatives composed by Hector Berlioz. Sir John Eliot Gardiner conducted the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, which specializes in the performance of classical and romantic repertoire with the use of period instruments. This practice, first connected to early music performance, has more recently been applied also to classical and romantic music with the aim of approaching to the sound world of the period in which the music was composed.

The French version of *Der Freischütz* played by the Orchestre originated as an echo of the opera's success at its 1821 Berlin premiere. Three years later, the very first French version *Robin des Bois* was performed in Paris, but Berlioz, a strong admirer of Weber's work, was uneasy with this poorly done adaptation that substantially altered the plot and the music. Approximately twenty years later, the composer was given the opportunity to make things better for a new production of the *Freischütz* at the Opéra. The libretto for this occasion was translated without substantial alternation by Emilien Pacini, while Berlioz was invited to adapt the work to follow the strict rules of the Opéra, which forbade spoken dialogue and required some dance numbers. The result was *Le Freischütz*, first performed in 1841 and only recently revived by Sir Gardiner and his orchestra in 2011, first in April at the Opéra-Comique in Paris and later in semi-staged form at the BBC Proms.

As it is evident from his *Mémoires*, Berlioz was never fully happy with his work on *Le Freischütz*, but accepted the commission as he feared that less appreciative composers might alter Weber's masterpiece too much. Berlioz thought his recitatives were too heavy compared to the lightness of the spoken dialogues; however, the composer worked with Pacini to reduce the connecting dialogues, so to keep a similar pace to the original version. Berlioz might have been too hard on himself, as the recitatives are light and not too intrusive, with mainly strings playing chords, occasionally joined by two flutes, two clarinets and a horn. Only some parts are more heavily composed, especially when leading to the beginning of an aria, usually with motives from preceding or following numbers. For example, at the beginning of „Wie? Was? Entsetzen!“, Agathe's break into song is somewhat less dramatic with the addition of music that builds up the tension just before the aria. On occasion, the recitatives inevitably interfere with the alternation of spoken words and music in some arias. This is particularly evident in „Hier

im ird'schen Jammerthal“, at the Wolfsschlucht, and it somehow spoils the bridesmaid's slightly frightened reprise of the *Volkslied* after Agathe's discovery of the funeral wreath in the box.

Berlioz also had to introduce some ballet episodes, for which he chose to arrange other pieces by Weber. He included numbers from *Preciosa* and *Oberon*, but perhaps the most famous inclusion is *Aufforderung zum Tanze*, the arrangement of which is still an oft performed orchestral piece. The performance at the Proms only included this last piece, just after the Jägerchor, in form of entr'acte, without dancing.

Der Freischütz can be quite difficult to stage and the music leaves breadth for substantial action on scene. The Proms semi-staged performance was surprisingly successful in filling the gaps. Both singers and chorus (The Monteverdi Choir) started dressed in concert suits, but gradually the costumes and the action became richer and developed around the orchestra at the centre of the stage. The only prop on-stage was an empty timpano that doubled as a cauldron for the Wolfsschlucht scene, which turned remarkably spooky when high pitch cries were heard from all over the Royal Albert Hall (a large arena with a capacity of circa six thousand people).

Despite the Hall's below-average acoustics, the singing was wonderful (a podcast of the night on the BBC website proved this more than my slightly remote position in the upper circle). Besides the excellent Monteverdi Choir, Andrew Keenedy (Max) and Sophie Karthäuser (Agathe) deserve a special mention. Virginie Pochon (Annette/Ännchen) also showed superb technique, but the best presence on stage and the most captivating voice was the outstanding Gidon Saks (Gaspard/Kaspar).

The Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique was brilliantly directed by Sir Gardiner, who admitted, in an pre-performance interview, to slightly prefer the French version of *Der Freischütz* to the original Weber. The conductor believes that its elegant continuity highlights Weber's innovative use of the orchestra. The period instruments occasionally didn't sound as neatly as their modern counterparts could (this was perhaps most noticeable in the solo viola parts and in the brass section), but this light roughness is also a component of the unique experience that historically informed performance brings to the modern performance halls.

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