

Korngold in London

A Miracle revisited

Ariel & Guy Wagner

As part of its commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, the London Philharmonic Orchestra programmed a concert performance of „Das Wunder der Heliane“ at the Festival Hall.

This was an event of genuine musical interest (as distinct from a piece of glitzy globalised „event-culture“): the UK-premiere of a major 20th century opera.

The LPO, under its new principal conductor, Vladimir Jurowski, the Europa-ChorAkademie from Mainz, director Joshard Daus, and the soloists, had just over a week to rehearse and the work-schedule was taxing for all concerned.

At the afternoon rehearsal we attended on Monday 19th November at the Henry Wood Hall, a classical revival former church in South London, they had reached corrections to Act II and Act III run-through.

We knew the opera required vast forces and resources, but seeing them all together in the flesh was impressive. The rectangular hall was packed to its gallery with an orchestra of 110 (the usual, plus off-stage tubular bells and percussion), harps, piano, celesta, organ, guitar and harmonium; large mixed choir and 15 soloists: two angelic voices, six judges and the seven principals.

We wondered at the serenity that reigned at the heart of the hurly-burly. A few moments into Jurowski's clear instructions and precise, eloquent conducting we understood.

He had learned the work from the piano score, as it was composed – and could thus share the composer's vision of its complex inner structures, the balance and colours in the orchestra. And he conveyed this vision to the musicians with clarity and conviction, instilling into them the confidence necessary to put it across. As he pointed out: If in Korngold's day opera orchestras couldn't necessarily manage all the notes of a difficult score, a modern symphony orchestra can – and therefore must ...

Next day's dress rehearsal in the Festival Hall confirmed the validity of Jurowski's approach, even if our impression of the music was very different – less overpowering, more transparent.

The conductor had positioned the orchestra somewhat lower than the singers, with the soloists – surprisingly, but presumably for reasons of space – behind them, between the male and female choirs. He had also had drapes fixed up at certain points round the hall so the acoustics were closer to those of a full auditorium.

And full it was the next evening; Jessica Duchén's useful presentation was well-at-

tended and the performance close to sold out.

But what is *Heliane* about? First, it has to be said, Hans Müller's libretto, after Hans Kaltneker, is not the opera's strongest point. It is an ambivalent farrago, the heavy symbolism of a mystery-morality play steeped in the airless eroticism of, say, Wilde's *Salome*. A Ruler, un-

able to „know“ his wife (Heliane) has banished laughter and joy from his kingdom. A Stranger, who preaches love to the people, is condemned to death. Heliane visits him in prison, they fall in love and at his request, she stands naked before him. The Ruler discovers them; eventually, the Stranger stabs himself and to avoid the stake, Heliane must bring him back to life ...

Korngold wrote what is probably his most ambitious work between 1923 and 1927 and it was first performed in Hamburg on 13 October of that year. Despite favourable reactions, it was not a success, falling victim first to his critic-father's vicious attacks on Krenek's contemporaneous opera *Jonny spielt auf*, which set the modernist faction against *Heliane*, then to the Nazis' ban on „Jewish music“.

It was a turning-point for the composer. Bitterly disappointed, Korngold started to neglect „absolute“ music. He concentrated more and more on arranging operettas – notably for Max Reinhardt, who would eventually invite him to Hollywood, to work on a film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He commuted for several years – and happened to be in the USA in 1938, at the time of the „Anschluss“. The failure of *Heliane* had indirectly saved his life.

The opera's neglect is certainly due in part to the demands it makes, logistically and musically. It is a real loss for the repertory, as the opera contains some of the most luscious music Korngold ever wrote: rich, complex harmony, a wealth of colour and deeply moving melody.

A committed conductor and a top-class orchestra, virtuosi all, ensured that the music was more than well-served. And the choirs, the judges and the heavenly voices were committed and expressive. The quality of the soloists varied however – and none was helped by having to sing through the large orchestra.

Andrew Kennedy as the Young Man had



Photo: London Philharmonic Orchestra

Surprisingly, the soloists were placed behind the orchestra

a tiny part but his shining tenor is something to listen out for, as are the colourful timbre and vocal agility of Ursula Hesse von den Steinen (the Messenger). As one would expect, both Robert Tear and Willard White brought a maturity and dramatic empathy born of long experience to the parts, respectively, of the Blind Judge and the Porter.

Andreas Schmidt as the Ruler was perhaps not on form, but he sounded indistinct and strained in a demanding part that calls for force and clarity. The Messianic figure of the Stranger requires a fine balance between innocence, passionate conviction and, well, passion. Not easy. Michael Hendrick has a pleasant voice, which rose to the occasion at certain points. But – and this is a drawback of a modern concert performance – watching him drinking water while Heliane poured out her love for him made one ponder his commitment.

As for the heroine herself, Patricia Racette's warm-timbred malleable soprano suited the role well. If she did not perhaps make as much as she could out of her big Act II aria: „Ich ging zu ihm“, it might be because virtually all her music is pitched at a high level of intensity.

The audience was enthusiastic. Personally, we were filled with overpowering musical impressions yet drained emotionally: *Heliane* is not a work you could listen to too often.

Was all the hard work, commitment and expense worth it? Without any doubt. But one question remains: The work is written for the stage, yet the drama is psychological rather than physical. And the subject matter is really that of an oratorio. A concert performance would seem a good solution. Yet in a concert performance, the psychological relationship between the characters, on which the „action“ is founded, is hard to convey.

Perhaps a semi-staged version might be the ideal solution. To meditate.