

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL CONCERT REVIEW 14.11.2009

Honegger, Saint-Saëns and Stravinsky: Boston Symphony Orchestra, Lise de la Salle (piano), Fabio Luisi (guest conductor), Boston

The weather in Boston has been wet and raw of late; hardly any surprise, but it is all the more reason to welcome the unseasonable warmth of Honegger's *Pastorale d'été*. The program notes made a point of tying various elements of this modest piece to so many different composers and stylistic elements, that there seems far too much lumber for the modest project. All the several musical connections (ranging from Wagner to Ravel) are well enough considered, but what gets lost is any view about the character of Honegger's own piece, which is no mere pastiche. The music is suffused with a sun-drenched calm, but the murmurs of flute and oboe are not those of a *debussyste* Pan; the scoring has a delicacy and clarity which seem impossible without Debussy's example, but which nonetheless suggest that for Honegger, Debussy's palette is a shade too *rich*. Moreover, the piece's charming calm is a beguiling contrast to the mechanized romp of the composer's rather better-known *Pacific 231*.

It is an inescapable irony that Honegger's name should be necessarily linked with *Les Six* (a group possessed of "no common aesthetic and no real standing as an artistic movement" in Hugh MacDonald's pithily apt remarks). From the outset Honegger evinced no interest in the music-hall-esque "mandated frivolity" which Cocteau so noisily promoted; but instead quietly drew his own inspirations from both the past and his recent contemporaries. "*Les Six*? No one would ever have used this label without Collet's article. Cocteau? He's not a musician, not even enough to justify scattering arbitrary judgments about Bach and Beethoven." This performance of the *Pastorale d'été* was something of a tease: a modest concert-opener, revealing a composer of range and a talented earnestness which provoke a wish that (for instance) the symphonies might be brought (or brought back) to Symphony.

The 21-year-old Lise de la Salle made a fine and impressive debut with the BSO.

Saint-Saëns may seem an unlikely choice for a young soloist eager to make a mark for her first appearance at Boston's Symphony Hall – it's not a piece to shake the rafters, as a Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff concerto should. Yet her performance bore out the shrewd rightness of the selection. The soloist opens the concerto (and we may observe the curious coincidence that both Prokofiev and Saint-Saëns cast their respective second concerti in the key of g minor) with a mini-fantasia of a character suggesting an organ prelude (and Saint-Saëns was a formidable organist – "the greatest in the world," according to Liszt). **De la Salle invested the piece from the start with an undercurrent of bristling drama** which might have suggested Beethoven rather than any Romantic after him; it was expert delivery which both set a compelling tone for the piece overall, and which contrasted neatly with the fleeter-footed graces of the second and third movements. **In the space of what may superficially seem a 'light' concerto, de la Salle demonstrated poignant gravity, graceful agility, and a sensitivity to ensemble, which promise a future of rich artistry. The performance brought the hall to its feet, and the ovation (which called the soloist back out on-stage) was well earned.**

If I ever knew that the 1947 version of *Petrushka* includes an optional concert ending, I had forgotten it – a fact which endowed Saturday's performance with an element of surprise, in a classic score which one would have thought past any surprise. What a pleasure to be able to report that the BSO play this piece with a technical assurance

which makes it seem easy, and yet with a passion and enthusiasm which leads you to imagine that the piece was written last year. The sharp corners which both *Petrushka* and the Saint-Saëns concerto frequently turn are no snare to the feet of this band, and in a performance such as this past Saturday's, it was simple exhilaration to see and hear them at play. They are not auto-pilot pieces, at all, and so mutual congratulations go both to the orchestra, and to guest conductor Fabio Luisi. The whole group gave a stand-out performance, but to name three players for signal service in *Petrushka*: Vytas Baksys, whose incisive and scintillating touch at the piano was a reminder of how Stravinsky started the composition not as a ballet, but as a concert-piece for piano and orchestra; Thomas Rolfs, principal trumpet, especially for the long-breathed cornet call which is the entrance of the 'charmingly pneumatic' ballerina into the Moor's cell; and Elizabeth Rowe, whose flute represented the conjurer who brought the three puppets to life in the first tableau.

Karl Henning