

Holy things

Estonian Music Days (12–19 April 2018, Tallinn and Tartu)

Each year, the Estonian Music Days chooses a theme to underpin the festival, and for 2018 that theme was ‘sacred’. It’s a complex word, rich with connotations and interpretations, and any meaningful contemporary reflection on the sacred must inevitably embrace a tension of ideas and outlooks, in which religious and secular concepts and sensibilities sit side by side in a delicate balance.

The music featured at the 2018 Estonian Music Days explored this balance superbly, presenting a wide diversity of responses to the theme. In Erkki-Sven Tüür’s *Symphony No. 4 ‘Magma’*, performed by percussion soloist Heigo Rosin with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Risto Joost, the sacred was found rooted in nature, expressed in energetic turbulence, sounding as though it had ripped open the earth’s crust. A stylised paean to the glory and ferocity of nature at its most raw, like nature itself Tüür’s ‘Magma’ symphony engulfed and exhilarated.

At the opposite end of the nature-religion continuum was Galina Grigorjeva’s seven-movement *Vespers*. The work’s meaning and intention were not black and white: whether or not the piece was intended to be perceived as an act of worship was somewhat ambiguous. Certainly, the solemnity of the performance by Vox Clamantis highlighted its liturgical potential, as did the various places where Grigorjeva’s style came close to that of Arvo Pärt, but the ambiguity about its nature happily remained, particularly in the work’s more adventurous earlier movements.

However, the music that made the strongest and most long-lasting impression was where notions of religious and secular, of this world and the beyond, of human and divine, were present simultaneously. Lepo Sumera’s *Play for Two*, for violin and percussion with electronics,

focused on a relationship where contrasting material was the basis for dis-harmony and aggression. Enhanced by the electronics, the players’ actions – performed by Eva-Maria Sumera and Vambola Krigul – slowly became more sympathetic, eventually establishing that most holy of things, reconciliation between former enemies. At the same concert, Liina Sumera’s electronic work *Conatus* explored a sequence of meditative episodes that combined its elements in a fluid, organic way; there were no sudden surprises, yet it was constantly unpredictable. The climax of the work flooded Tallinn’s Niguliste church with an unutterably lovely burst of intense electricity; it was as if we had become Dante to Sumera’s Beatrice, all of us being carried upward by a gentle but infinite will, into the heights of paradise.

Two choral pieces managed to tap into the very heart of the ‘sacred’, focusing on what is surely the most quintessential aspect of all things, human and divine: love. Maria Kõrvits’ *I Am Calling For You*, receiving its first performance by the Estonian National Male Choir conducted by Mikk Üleoja, used an anonymous text that could be interpreted in many ways: the voice of the universe, a kindred spirit, an admirer from afar, a subconscious vocation, a repressed desire, or a divine presence. These multiple interpretations all intermingled in real-time as the music progressed, Kõrvits allowing the music to roam freely yet establishing a sublime sense of stasis and infinity. Choral music – especially religious choral music – so often does mere lip-service to the love that supposedly impels its worship and doctrines, yet here was a rare example of it manifesting in a genuine way, nebulous yet numinous.

Another example came with Vox Clamantis’ performance of Helena Tulve’s *You and I*, a work concerned with

the mystical expression of physical and spiritual union. The fact that Tulve composed this piece for the choir conducted by her husband (Jaan-Eik Tulve) added a layer of significance to its theme of love. Yet the real power of *You and I* was that its expression of love felt both universal and intensely personal. Its words could be interpreted on the most cosmic scale, bridging the gap between earth and heaven, or as a lovesong by Mother Earth to all of us who inhabit her landscapes, as well as, of course, an exquisitely affectionate confiding of love between two people. In the overwhelming, heart-stopping beauty and almost unbearable intimacy of Tulve’s music, the singers woven together into an intricate stream of complex fragrance, *You and I* reminded us not only that love is sacred, but the act of loving – of sharing love, with a deity, with our world, with one another – sanctifies us, and makes us holy.

When one considers the manifold problems that plague and pollute our planet and its peoples, there are times when it can seem as if music is powerless to offer anything more than a distraction. Yet the Estonian Music Days emphasised the power that music has to cause us to reflect on the things that we cherish and regard as sacred, and to effect an inner change in each of us that can, in turn, bring about outward actions that could possibly transform the world.

Simon Cummings