

Music: Concert review

Raucous and translucent, VSO embraces opposites



ELISSA POOLE

Vancouver Symphony Orchestra

- Bramwell Tovey, conductor
- Allyson McHardy, mezzo-soprano
- John Mac Master, tenor
- At the Orpheum in Vancouver on Monday

The eighth-century Chinese poems that inspired Gustav's Mahler's song of the earth, *Das Lied von der Erde*, provided the composer with a plethora of contrasting images. An ape howls on a gravestone in the moonlight, a bridge arches across a flat pond to a graceful pavilion, young girls pick lotus blossoms, a drunk staggers gullet-full to his door. Beauty and crassness, contemplation and mindless oblivion, life and death: These extremes call forth music that is raucous and messy in one song and of singular translucence in another. The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's performance of *Das Lied von der Erde* on Monday embraced these opposites in every way, not the least in its choice of soloists, tenor John Mac Master and mezzo-soprano Allyson McHardy.

Of the six "songs" that make up *Das Lied von der Erde*, three are drinking songs. These are the tenor's to sing, and Mac Master gave them a bright, forward Falstaffian physicality rooted in life and excess and sensuality. He was never shy with his part, which can be brazen and high, and he didn't attempt to make everything sound beautiful or refined. Instead he approached these songs as if they were characters, investing them with increasing humanity and allegorical weight as the cycle progressed. Mac Master also has an actor's presence on stage, with discreet but effective gestures, a communicative face, and an engaging way of acknowledging what's going on around him in the orchestra, as if the other instruments (a violin soloist, for instance) were essentially characters as well.

The mezzo-soprano songs, on the other hand, describe a more sober, ethereal and idealized atmosphere, and McHardy, who is the embodiment of youth and beauty, captured this to perfection. Her voice is opaque and velvety smooth, almost other-worldly in its lack of edge, its unforced, self-contained, lullaby-dulcet beauty. There's not much sunshine in McHardy's sound. It seems comprised, instead, of reflected light, though it is still radiant and warm. McHardy projects incredible serenity on stage, and the final song, *Der Abschied* (the farewell) was, as it should be, the polar opposite of the opening drinking song that Mac Master sang with such earthy vitality.

McHardy's farewell was sublime, but we could not have reached that point without Mac Master's potent contrasts, his willingness to take risks, his extroverted delivery. And we could not have reached it without the orchestra's many contributions either. These include Christie Reside's solo flute obbligatos in *Der Abschied*, which matched McHardy's voice so beautifully, Roger Cole's plaintive oboe solos, the horn solos in *Der Einsame im Herbst*, and the long orchestral interlude in the final movement. This is not without a few caveats: Conductor Bramwell Tovey doesn't ask for as sustained a legato as he might, nor do the strings give us the portamento we sometimes long to hear in those arching intervals. Occasionally I wanted to stay in one place longer than we did. But quite a few surprises made up for that, including the elegant pauses at the end of some of the phrases, momentum where it was least expected, the clarity of the harp timbre (something that is never quite captured in a recording).

It's not easy to find effective companions for this Mahler, but we also loved the VSO's unorthodox choices: a short, odd, somewhat impressionistic tone poem called *The Enchanted Lake* by Russian Anatoly Liadov, and the *Four Sea Interludes* from Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/music/raucous-and-translucent-vso-embraces-opposites/article2050273/>