



By Geoff Diggins

Søndergård Introduces Danish History into LPO Concert

Sergej Krylov, violin

Thomas Søndergård, conductor
London Philharmonic Orchestra
Royal Festival Hall | London | 8.10.2016.

Sibelius – *King Kristian II Suite*
Panufnik – Violin Concerto
Shostakovich – Symphony No.5, Op.47



The *King Kristian II Suite* of 1898 deserves to be better known. It has all the lyrical/dramatic contrast of the earlier, and much better known *Karelia Suite* of 1893, and a concluding dance-like movement which is more innovative in orchestration – cutting brass motifs and menacing rounds for timps. I suppose part of the reason for *Karelia's* lasting popularity is that it was used as a TV News theme some years ago. Some would say that such media association helps to bring quality music to a wider audience, but I am not so sure. In many ways it serves to vulgarise, to 'reify' the music concerned. The Suite's opening 'Nocturne' denotes a love scene and at an early performance in Leipzig its rich tone colours and harmonies were likened to Mascagni in the evocation of Italian sounding sensuality. Sibelius wrote the music for a play based on real and rather gruesome events from Danish, Norwegian and Swedish history. Kristian II, King of Denmark, craves revenge for the death of his lover, and this develops into a lust for power and gaining the Swedish throne, which he does – but only briefly. To confirm his power, he orders the public execution (beheading) of a large number of his opponents at a banquet; later this came to be known as 'the Stockholm Bloodbath'. The Danish conductor Thomas Søndergård conducted a most empathetic performance with sensitive phrasing and an attention to detail, which never lost sight of the whole. The central 'elegy' for strings alone, was particularly moving in its subtle harmonic shifts and touch of melancholy. All the way through I heard pre-figurations/allusions to themes and melodies later to appear in the First and Second symphonies.

Panufnik composed his Violin Concerto in 1971 for the veteran violinist Yehudi Menuhin who had requested the concerto. It was composed to be premiered by Menuhin with his Menuhin Festival Orchestra, and Menuhin performed the concerto in 1972 at the City of London Festival with the composer conducting. The opening 'Rubato' starts with a quasi-cadenza for soloist, which sets the mood of the movement. This is carried over by the orchestra (for strings only) which accompanies the soloist's long cantilena. After a quasi-development section based on two intervals in minor and minor inn the flow of the music the solo cantilena re-emerges and brings the movement to an end with a shortened quasi-cadenza for soloist.

Tonight there was a wonderful dialogue between soloist and conductor. Both attended to the very flexible tempo indication 'Rubato'. I had not heard Moscow trained Sergei Krylov before, but by tonight's standards he is clearly one of the most distinguished violinists playing today. His tone is so diverse, as are his glissandi and pizzicato as heard in the concertos finale. He negotiates multi-stopping (chordal playing) with absolute assurance and integrity. Throughout the concerto Krylov deployed an absolute minimum of vibrato thereby playing with a tonal purity which so informs Panufnik's design. I can't imagine Menuhin or any other violinist dead or alive surpassing Krylov.

The Adagio, built on alternate minor and major triads initially in the orchestra, but then taken up by the soloist, as one commentator has noted, the dark minor thirds take the semblance of a Purcell-like descending bass line. The movement's coda exudes a poetics of simplicity and reflexivity all ultimately expressed by the soloist in the tone of 'molto tranquillo' marked in the score.

The 'vivace' finale further explores the use of minor and major thirds – in the second section the melodic line initiates a minor triad as a kind of elaborated reflection from the first movement. In this

movement the emphasis is very much on rhythm and constant cross-rhythms – except in the middle section- where the soloist plays a long cantabile sequence on a G-string, compellingly sustained by Krylov tonight. But all this is interrupted by short rhythmic constellations from the orchestra increasingly in dance mode. Panufnik wrote here that he wanted to convey the human feelings of joyousness, vitality and even some sense of humour.

As an encore Krylov played a brilliant and perceptive rendition of Ysayë's 'Obsession' from his Second Violin Sonata in A minor, Op.27 with its intonations of the 'Dies irae'.

In a recent review of the Shostakovich 5 with the LSO under Nosedá I wrote, of the Largo in particular, as 'having an almost unbearable dramatic/brooding intensity I have seldom heard. The development of unbroken cadences after the first impassioned D minor climax mutating into regions of ill-defined tonality captured with almost the dark conviction of the great Mravinsky'. Tonight Søndergård conducted a fine performance of Shostakovich 5. It was well rehearsed, well played and had overall coherence, from the opening bass recitatives through to the resounding D's of the triumphant march sequence in the first movement, and the much misunderstood coda of the symphony. As with Nosedá, I heard nothing of Stalin in the performance. This is a superbly structured symphony which doesn't need any kind of extra-musical, political rhetoric to enhance its status. The second movement *Allegretto*, as with Nosedá, was similarly well pointed, which sharp accents, particularly from brass and woodwind. There was certainly a note of carnival irony here, well projected by Søndergård and, as with Nosedá, I was quite happy to forget the spurious, much mentioned Mahlerian influence. In terms of comparisons (not all comparisons are odious) it could be argued that the two performances were roughly equal, although obviously different; overall Søndergård's performance was more light-footed, and slightly more swift, with no lack of drama and power when required. But if I had to choose from the two performances it would have to be Nosedá's with the LSO. It was overall a weightier performance, and the LSO's playing was more attuned to the dramatic moments of the score. The LSO's playing was more attuned to the dramatic moments in the score – with crucially more dark intensity in the Largo as mentioned above in the quote from my review- with slightly more coordinated rhythmic thrust. Nosedá also took much more care through dynamic gradation and structural insight and rigour to connect the climactic D major coda with the preceding structural design both in the finale and the whole symphony.

As I said in my review of the Nosedá, 'This symphonic coda, far from being some kind of political agitprop emphasising the banality of power, is in fact a most carefully and economically structured symphonic coda'. I noted in that review that the largely spurious claims of the book 'Testimony', the composer's supposed memoirs, edited by Solomon Volkov, in which Shostakovich's music is largely reduced to political affiliation and resistance, is still very much in fashion, particularly in the West. And so it proved to be in tonight's programme notes, where again Shostakovich's superbly symphonic coda is reduced to tiresome clichés about Stalin, coercion and the banality of political power!

<http://seenandheard-international.com/2016/10/sondergard-introduces-danish-history-into-lpo-concert/>