


The SWR Symphony Orchestra's Triumphant First – and Last – Appearance at the Proms

 United Kingdom **Prom 55 – Boulez, Ligeti, and Bartók:** Sophie Cherrier (flute), SWR Experimental Studio (live electronics), SWR Symphony Orchestra Baden-Baden and Freiburg, François-Xavier Roth (conductor). Royal Albert Hall, London, 26.8.2015 (MB)



François-Xavier Roth conducts the SWR Symphony Orchestra Baden-Baden and Freiburg at the BBC Proms
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Boulez—...*explosante-fixe*...

Ligeti—*Lontano*

Bartók—Concerto for Orchestra

First, ...*explosante-fixe*..., one of the Boulez works I had yet to hear this anniversary year, although I have heard its [Originel](#) seed more than once, and shall do again this weekend at a Proms Matinée. Sophie Cherrier, whom I had most recently heard in stunning [Salzburg Festival performances of Répons](#), joined SWR forces, including flautists Dagmar Becker and Anne Romeis, under François-Xavier Roth. Cherrier proved as commanding and as malleable a soloist as one would have expected, her flautist supporters just as impressive. It is an exquisite work(-in-progress) and received an exquisite performance from all concerned, certainly not forgetting the SWR Experimental Studio. If I felt slightly dissatisfied, it was that my seat – too far to one side? – did not really permit the electronics to resound, to incite as they might have done. Rather to my surprise, the Royal Albert Hall seemed to work less well than the Queen Elizabeth Hall had in 2011 for a mesmerising performance from [John Cox, the London Sinfonietta, and Péter Eötvös](#). Still, the ‘exquisite labyrinth’, to borrow from the title given to that South Bank series, of Boulez’s music retained its fascination, its post-Debussyan

seduction, and the intangible yet surely present ‘modern classicism’ Arnold Whittall has identified as a key component of Boulez’s later style. Form created itself just as sonorities seemed to do so; if only the setting had been a little more ideal.

Ligeti’s *Lontano* was given its first performance by this orchestra at Donaueschingen in 1967. A beautifully judged performance from an orchestra of at least Mahlerian forces was notable for its subtle transformations; more than once, the word *Klangfarbenmelodie* came to mind, without Ligeti’s procedures being reducible to the practice of either Schoenberg or Webern. Indeed, as something equating to a tone poem, the work – and performance – offered sepulchral brass with more than a hint of Wagner and Strauss. Harmonics suggested electronic means that were not present, even perhaps an organ (such as might also have been suggested in ...*explosante-fixe*...). Swarming violins reminded us of the Ligeti of the previous decade, whilst also making clear the development in his style. That (almost) imperceptible polyphony to which Ligeti himself drew attention did its wondrous work: ‘its harmonic effect represents the intrinsic musical action: what is on the page is polyphony, but what is heard is harmony.’ Hell, however, is too good for the person who took a telephone call as the piece drew to its close, music shading into silence.

Roth’s way – and the orchestra’s – with Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra gave one of the most intriguing performances I have heard of the work, perhaps the most intriguing, at least since I last heard Boulez conduct it. The opening of the first movement stated its affinity with *Bluebeard’s Castle* as strongly and yet, quite properly, as ambiguously as I can recall. Both the bass line and those shivering, trembling lines above made that connection and also reminded us of *Lontano*. Throughout, this was a performance one might file under ‘modernist’, but that description raises more questions than it asks. It was more mysterious than Boulez, more internationalist than the stereotypical ‘Hungarian’ performances one often hears. Above all, it told its own story with its own means. Subtle inflections, be they of instrumental colour, texture, or rhythm, were to the fore. One was drawn in rather than the victim of a Solti scream. Even at the louder end of the dynamic spectrum, employed relatively sparingly, gradations were subtle, meaningful. Bartók’s startling formal ingenuity spoke for itself; or such was the illusion, as art concealed art.

The second movement delighted in its ‘pair play’, woodwind duetting – and other ensemble work – colourful and ever ambiguous. This was detailed, without a hint of pedantry: delightful indeed! The grave opening of the ‘Elegia’ was ‘elegiac’ indeed. Woodwind reminded us of the opening of the work and thus again of *Bluebeard’s Castle*, but the path taken was to be very different. This was a world of defiant passion. And how those massed strings dug in! For the anguish was undeniably musical, not something cheaply applied. One was beguiled – and unsettled. The fourth movement began very much as a counterpart to the *scherzando* second movement, yet just as important, announced and celebrated its own character and concerns. A brief Mahlerian moment underscored Bartók’s seriousness, providing retrospective bite to his unanswerable despatch of the banalities of Lehár and Shostakovich alike. Excitement was certainly a crucial quality to the performance of the finale, but again this was an eminently musical excitement: one was compelled to listen, to delight in an invention that is almost Haydnesque, and to admire a not entirely dissimilar humanism. The players sounded well-nigh phantasmagorical in their transformation of material and process; Roth ensured there was no breaking of musical line.

How sad, then, that this, the orchestra’s first performance at the Proms, a veritable triumph, will also be its last. Following reprieves in which we had foolishly placed our trust, the unforgivable forced merger with its Stuttgart sister-orchestra is to go ahead after all. Roth

spoke at just the right time, many in the audience clearly unaware, but it was a forlorn announcement. Schubert, in *Rosamunde* guise, sounded all the more poignant as an encore.

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