
August 29th: Albert Hall, London.

London Sinfonietta conducted by
David Atherton.

Following the success of last season's "long prom", the London Sinfonietta presented another endurance-test of music and what might be called music theatre. Again a good fifth of the audience felt unable to see it through - again a pity for the last item which inevitably suffers from being presented so late.

Harrison Birtwistle's Down by the Greenwood Side was a bright opening to the evening. Commissioned for the 1969 Brighton Festival and termed a dramatic pastoral, it has two elements: a traditional ballad, The Cruel Mother, sung and acted by a soprano, and a conflation of various mummers' plays acted and spoken (not sung), with musical accompaniment. It is for dramatic works such as this that

I question the use of the Prom arena, since there were actors in strikingly bold masks and costumes and actions one wanted to see - fights and a grisly operation on St. George, amongst others. On this occasion I did not really see anything properly. I do think that for dramatic events we should be allowed to sit down in the sacred precincts (as at Covent Garden Proms, where one's squatting view in the stalls is superb). The play did seem to proceed heartily and the band of musicians at the side provided very suitable musical accompaniment - a spiky style which did not jar with the traditional words and actions. It is good to have such traditions preserved and refreshed. For all the symbolic message of the story of Mrs. Green and her dead babies and the juxtaposition of two traditional tales of life and death and the renewal of the seasons, however, I could not feel that putting the two together did much for either. The ballad was prettily sad, but Jenny Hill, the soprano, bathed in green light and flitting round the perimeter of the stage, never had the impact Birtwistle surely intended.

The meat of the programme came with performances of Stravinsky's Octet and Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony which preceded Kurt Weill's cantata Kleine Mahagonny. The Albert Hall is too big for these chamber works; they certainly suffered from juxtaposition with music for much larger forces. The Stravinsky sounded flaccid with little of the bite and rhythmic intansity one would expect from the London Sinfonietta. The Schoenberg was given a particularly romantic reading, popular with the audience if not with Schoenberg purists. I have some grumbles to make about the Weill - the singers were provided with microphones, the orchestra was not. Annie Ross, Cleo Laine, Gerald English, Robert Tear, Raimund Herincx and Michael Rippon stood before us and fed their capable voices into amplifying systems, and as the loudspeakers were at each side of the stage, one heardeither women or men - only the lucky few in the middle heard both and the orchestra. The work was presented with gusto, if not with enough of the bitter-sweet quality or savagery it demands. The men blended well (as far as I could hear); the women less so, Annie Ross having more idea of the style, Cleo Laine more stage presence.

John Tavener's Celtic Requiem was the unlucky final item, but in spite of the lateness of the hour it was given an attentive hearing and enthusiastic reception - it must be one of the most instantly-successful of recent works. In spite of previous hearings, I still found it almost impossible to pick out the words of the soprano and

chorus - the heavenly sounds and effects have to suffice; but the children's singing games always come over well. The organist enjoyed his big moment of E flat-based sound blocks, but 20 minutes of one chord was almost too much.

HILARY BRACEFIELD.
