



Sakari Oramo

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Heartbreaking music from a Nazi death-camp, plus the best of March's classical concerts

★★★★★

At Wigmore Hall, the Nash Ensemble gave a deeply affecting programme of the works of Jewish composers sent to Terezín (Theresienstadt)

Ivan Hewett, CHIEF CLASSICAL CRITIC *and* Nicholas Kenyon, CHIEF OPERA CRITIC

10 March 2024 • 1:46pm

BBC Symphony Orchestra, Barbican ★★★★★



Soprano Anu Komsi performing previously at the Barbican in 2023 | CREDIT: Mark Allan

A solemn German Requiem, a memorial piece for a beloved parent, and a musical tombstone for an unknown East German killed trying to cross the Berlin Wall. That in sum, was the content of this concert from the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and on its own was an eloquent rebuttal to the accusation that the BBC has lost its cultural weight and panders to the lowest common denominator.

However, it was a tough sell for an audience, especially when you consider the latter two pieces were written by contemporary Finnish composers in quite an abrasive modernist idiom. The evening might have been something of a penance; in fact it was enthralling from start to finish.

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The two Nordic choices were small masterpieces, in their different ways. Einojuhani Rautavaara gained a cult following for the mystical, Northern-lights soundscapes of his later music, but this, A Requiem in Our Time, for brass orchestra and percussion was very different. At times it was like an austere ceremonial, with sharply dissonant fanfares that evoked the courtly music that Sibelius wrote for the theatre. Set against this were anxious chants, suspended over the tiniest muted trumpet note, suggesting prayer pushing against a void of doubt. It was performed with tremendous control and concentration by BBC SO brass players, under their Finnish chief conductor Sakari Oramo.

Aulis Sallinen's Mauermusik (Wall Music) was more overly modernist, with all the tragic feeling focused on single burning chords, two-note drooping laments and – at one point – a despairing single note in the violins, sustained for what seemed an eternity. With this emotional weight placed on tiny things, the whole gossamer edifice could simply have collapsed like a house of cards, but this performance from the BBC SO and Oramo burned with sadness and anger.

In the second half, the orchestra was joined by the BBC Chorus and two soloists for Brahms's great German Requiem. This offers a different sort of intensity, bound up with thoughts of resignation, surrender to God's will, and the peace that follows the labour of life on earth. So not laser-like focus, as in the concert's first half, but a tender sympathetic glow, rising at times to majesty and awe. The performers under Oramo's ardent direction summoned all those qualities. The terror of All Flesh is Grass and the consolation of the final Blessed are the Dead were equally vivid. My only small quibble was with How beautiful are thy dwellings, which lifts the heart more when taken at a less stodgy pace.

Of the two soloists, baritone Christian Senn seemed somewhat lightweight, but the performance by Oramo's wife, Anu Komsu, of You now have sadness was simply heart-stopping. Her extraordinary soprano voice seemed to float down from an angelic realm, but as it descended it became human and consoling. It was truly the heart of this wonderful performance. **IH**

This concert will be broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 4 April at 7.30pm and is available for 30 days on BBC Sounds