

Classical Iconoclast 13.12.2016

Magnus Lindberg (b 1958) has a formidable body of work, almost entirely orchestral, chamber or instrumental, so *Accused*, for large orchestra and soprano, is something of a departure. It doesn't follow vocal writing conventions, but works, for me, anyway, more like a concerto, where impersonal forces are pitted against a single voice, always in opposition. Lindberg writes in blocks of sound - it's not every day we hear a phalanx of piccolos and flutes, small, individual voices acting en masse. No chance of concertante. That's not the nature of political suppression. The vocal line isn't easy, it twists and contorts, trying to resist.

Anu Komsis isn't an ordinary soprano, even by the standards of contemporary music. Her defiant coloratura scales extremes. Her lines are written to torment and torture. Yet, if you listen carefully, the outbursts are underpinned by underlying technical control. There are staccato passages so tightly focused, that, for a moment, the orchestra pulls back, then attempts staccato of its own without the commitment of the singer. After another vocal crescendo, the orchestra makes a strategic retreat into dark rumbling basses. The innate beauty of Komsis's voice asserts itself in longer lines, reminding us that the person accused is far more complex than her accusers. These little glimpses of the personality within shine out, despite the swirling tutti around her. Komsis's voice drops to quiet, low keening, then into fragile, broken fragments, before surging fiercely yet again. *Sotto voce* mumbles suddenly switch to clear, bright cries. Perhaps because we're familiar with Bradley/Chelsea Manning, we can pick up on the contradictions in the character of Komsis's portrayal. For example the soaring lines that turn back on themselves even if the words being sung suggest the dominance of the orchestra (the military). Komsis's femininity matters, as it matters to Manning. This final scena ends with an oddly beautiful fragility, Komsis's voice defying physical limitations. A celeste, strings and harp suggest that Manning might draw a measure of solace, knowing that the world is looking on.