



Classical review: British conductors bring the sounds of revolution to the Lucerne Festival

By Jessica Duchon

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“Viva la revolucion!” An incongruous idea, perhaps, amid the Swiss lakes and mountains, let alone Lucerne’s ever-shiny music festival. But there we go: revolution, or its musical history, is the event’s “theme” for its 75th birthday year.

The Berliner Philharmoniker homed in on the upheavals that Schoenberg, Berg and Stravinsky set in motion as the 20 century began: its principal conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, was at the helm for a programme culminating with Stravinsky’s 1947 version of the 1913 ballet *The Rite of Spring* (yet another centenary performance - there’ve been a few).

Rattle and his Berlin orchestra still reign supreme in the orchestral world when it comes to sensuous beauty of tone. Schoenberg’s early masterpiece *Verklärte Nacht*, a musical depiction of a Richard Dehmel poem about the transformative potential of love, shuddered and shimmered with ideal intensity.

It turned out to be the evening’s highlight, though, which probably wasn’t quite the idea. Three Fragments from *Wozzeck*, the seminal opera by Schoenberg’s disciple Alban Berg, are very fragmentary indeed, making an incongruous *bonne bouche*. But this did offer a tantalising glimpse of the Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan, whose command of contemporary idioms, extraordinary stage presence and vocal glories have been much in the spotlight recently (notably in George Benjamin’s opera *Written on Skin*). Orchestra and singer performed with close attention to each strand of sound and the dramatic implication of every syllable, Hannigan seemingly possessed by the character of the desperate Marie.

Musical revolutions, of course, take many forms. Stravinsky’s, in *The Rite of Spring*, was to use the power of rhythm and clashing tonal centres to evoke the primal violence of nature and a tribal human sacrifice. Rattle’s interpretation, though, did something different. With earthy, thudding repetitions, this *Rite*’s rhythmic subversions dug into the ground rather than tearing themselves out of it; the orchestra’s tonal gorgeousness was back whenever opportunity presented itself, but the work’s cruelty played out with a suggestion of ice-cold mechanisation – in itself, perhaps a comment on the world of Stravinsky’s day, but still oddly detached rather than visceral.

Some real heart arrived with another British conductor the following night: Jonathan Nott and his Bamberg Symphony Orchestra, presenting Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* to begin Lucerne’s first-ever Ring cycle, in concert. This is a landmark for the town, where the composer lived for some years; and in a warm and supple performance the sterling-solid orchestra sounded in its element. Amid a fine cast, the Alberich of Johannes Martin Kränzle and the seductive Fricka of Elisabeth Kulman particularly stood out.