



Global celebration

A series of rousing performances are keeping the torch burning with an Olympian spirit of international harmony

A Mass of Life/The Makropulos Case/Trio Zimmermann/Dalmatica

AVAST, sprawling oratorio, written by an Englishman, inspired by a German philosopher, and celebrating the power and potential of the human spirit. Delius's *A Mass Of Life* was not only a spectacular but an entirely fitting way to open the International Festival's Usher Hall concerts this year. Festival director Jonathan Mills has taken an oblique slant on all things Olympic in his programming, cleverly distilling the general mood of celebration down into themes of international cooperation, youthful achievement and, of course, British pride.

Not that there was any narrow-focused nationalism in Andrew Davis's vivid performance with the Royal Scottish

National Orchestra. Instead, he focused on the Dionysiac rapture of Nietzsche's text and its appeals for us to embrace our inner superman. And he really seemed to have Delius's celebratory music in his blood, with an ideal balance between telling detail (the RSN0 strings sounded particularly lush) and large-scale architecture. Young German baritone Hanno Müller-Brachmann was gripping as he put across the musings of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, but the stars of the show were the singers of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus. Powerful when needed, they were impeccably drilled by chorus master Christopher Bell.

The soprano and mezzo soloists – a sharp-toned Anna Christy and fulsome-sounding Pamela Helen Stephen – might have been oddly matched. And things might have gone off the boil a bit in the second half, with its evocations of dancing maidens and a noon-time snooze. But the work's resonant conclusion was fittingly noble.

Night two brought the unveiling of Opera North's new production of *The Makropulos Case*, the latest in the company's long line of well-received Janáček operas under conductor Richard Farnes. And his Czech credentials showed right from the start: he drew playing



from the orchestra that was gloriously characterful – rugged and jagged, but entirely in keeping with the composer's iconoclastic sound world.

It's often thought a difficult piece, with a lengthy exposition detailing the ins and outs of an obscure legal case before it blossoms into a profounder exploration of immortality and desire. But director Tom Cairns skilfully transformed the first two acts into something resembling a farce, pointing up the humour in quickfire exchanges that can often seem mystifying.

Everything hinges on the work's central character,

“A profound exploration of immortality and desire”



Enigma: Ylva Kihlberg commands the stage as opera diva Emilia Marty in *The Makropulos Case*

though – the enigmatic opera diva Emilia Marty – and she was sung here with insight and intensity by Swedish soprano Ylva Kihlberg. She was slightly shrill in her upper register, but had a gloriously rich lower voice, and she could unleash sudden power to electrifying effect. More importantly, she commanded the stage – as Marty really should – despite a strong ensemble cast that included Paul Nilon as a needy Albert Gregor and Robert Hayward as an oily Baron Prus.

Over in the Queen's Hall, *Trio Zimmermann* sometimes seemed to be directing the dissecting power of a laser on to their music, such was the precision and clarity of their performances. This was high-contrast stuff on several levels – within the programme, where the

graceful Mozart *Divertimento K563* and Schoenberg's exacting *String Trio* of 1946 collided, and within the threesome's interpretations, big on drama and etched in stark black and white. The trio's players – violinist Frank Peter Zimmermann, violist Antoine Tamestit and cellist Christian Poltéra – are all international soloists in their own right, and it showed. They might have lacked the corporate sound that permanent ensembles usually develop, but they more than made up for it in sheer individual energy.

Despite a slightly restless audience, their Schoenberg *String Trio* (admittedly not always easy on the ear) was astonishing, a catalogue of special effects – harmonics, playing with the bow wood, tapping on the strings –

brought to vivid life by the players' force of personality. Every gesture was weighed, considered and given a clear intention, yet the whole had a lightness and transparency that belied the work's seriousness. The closing Mozart *Divertimento* was all sparkling freshness and elegant grace.

There was elegance aplenty, too, in the Greyfriars performance of *Dalmatica*, an exploration of Croatian religious chant from medieval times to the present day from two ensembles – the four female voices of Dialogos, led by Croatian-born Katarina Liviljanic, and Kantaduri, six male cantors from the same region.

It was a long evening admittedly – as evidenced by the numerous walk-outs by people hurrying to their next shows (the concert ran half an hour over its stated time). But it showed just what can be achieved with the simplest of theatrical effects. The ten singers combined in groups at different parts of the cavernous Greyfriars interior, their startlingly pure voices resonating off the church walls to astonishing effect, and bringing rich subtleties to melodies that sometimes hardly strayed further than a single note.

With its juxtaposition of two vocal traditions – the Catholic and the Byzantine – it was a return to Mills's festival themes of cooperation and tolerance, and a rare window on to a sumptuous musical culture. **fw**

All runs ended. www.eif.co.uk