
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From Oliver Soden

I was informed and entertained by Robin Maconie's article 'Divine Comedy: Stockhausen's *Mittwoch* in Birmingham' (*Tempo* Vol. 67 No. 263), but sad that he'd come to such negative conclusions about Graham Vick's production, and confused at how he'd arrived at many of them.

Maconie appears to want to have his *Mittwoch* and eat it. He praises what he perceives, in the positive reviews of the production, as 'an inclination to suffer a little for art', yet complains (at length) about his own physical discomfort: '[we were] forced to sit on infant campstools or to lie on poolside mattresses ... or bare sheets of industrial foam rubber ... [we were] forced to perch uneasily in virtual darkness on kindergarten camp stools'. He damns the production 'because it was careless of, or unfaithful to, the composer's intentions', yet berates it for not showing 'a little invention' in its realization of Stockhausen's demands, rather than following them to the letter. I cannot agree with Maconie's claim that 'projecting movie images' would have shown more theatrical invention than choosing, as Graham Vick did, physically to stage Stockhausen's list of images in the 'Orchester-Finalisten'. On the day I attended, the actors' expressions at this point were not 'glazed' but enraptured, the audience surrounding me thrilled rather than 'bemused'.

Maconie concedes that the production 'probably could not succeed', but blames it for not doing so. He accuses it of deliberately contriving to humiliate its audience and, with perverse logic, finds evidence, in the 'Chinese takeaway stationed in the car-park' and in Vick's choice of a 'descendant of British and Indian stock' to host the 'Helikopter-Streichquartett', of a 'deeply unsavoury neo-Aryan script'. Actually, DJ Nihal Arthanayake was born to Sri Lankan parents. Mr. Maconie compounds his error by stating

'I am bound to point out [DJ Nihal] is of Anglo-Indian descent'.

Mr Maconie writes of the 'Welt-Parlament': 'In the score, each member *ought* to have carried a ticking digital metronome set to a different tempo, creating a delicate halo of Ligeti-like noise to accompany the choir's entrance and exit. Alas, there were no metronomes ...' But there *were* metronomes, held by all the performers bar the tenors, as the score instructs. This is clearly visible in many production images, and clearly audible in much of the footage available on YouTube. A performer in this act confirmed to me that metronomes were used in every performance and throughout rehearsal.

What production did Mr. Maconie attend? It certainly bears little resemblance to the day I spent in Birmingham, memories of which continue to enthrall and delight. What Mr. Maconie describes as 'an audience consisting largely of adults over forty' was actually, at least for the second of the four performances, quite startling in its diversity: there were more young children present than can usually be found during a month's worth of opera-going in London (and the seating seemed, both to me and my 65-year old companion, more comfortable than the restricted leg-room of most London opera houses). I was astonished at Graham Vick's ability, alongside captaining a ship of jaw-dropping scale and complexity, meticulously to obey the score's weird and wonderful demands, with the utmost freedom and invention. But then, upbraiding a production of *Mittwoch*, however much our critical faculties shouldn't be dulled by novelty, seems rather like being lucky enough to track down a giant panda (or the equally endangered wild Bactrian camel) and finding it imperfect.

Flat 507, Colorado Building
Deals Gateway
London SE13 7RD