

✓ ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF  
(December 18th, 1983)

BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra, Ardwyn Singers, Cardiff Polyphonic Choir, Swansea Bach Choir, BBC Welsh Chorus. (Conductor: Andrew Davis, soloists: Joaquin Valdepenas, clarinet; Rosalind Plowright, soprano; Benjamin Luxon, baritone.)

Although there was much pleasure to be gained from the performances this was a strange concert from the point of view of programming. The first item, Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto in A Major K.622*, was followed by an interval which was in turn followed by a performance of Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. What connection there might be between the two works, other than the need for a fairly brief and popular ear-catching opener was not clear and neither work cast any light upon the other.

Indeed, such was the languid style with which Mozart's affectionate Clarinet Concerto was delivered that the connection that was actually made evident was the degree to which the music of Berlioz (especially a work such as *Beatrice and Benedict*) is Mozartian in style. The performance of the concerto by the young Mexican clarinetist Joaquin Valdepenas, and by the BBC Welsh Orchestra sounded most beautiful. Mr. Valdepenas seems to make a speciality of displaying the caressing nature of the tone that he produces when playing softly and quietly, which he does as often as possible. The orchestra played for Andrew Davis with a notable delicacy and responsiveness though without the pin-point clarity of string runs that one might reasonably expect. But overall, the self-indulgent regard for the lovely sound at the expense of an appropriate style, of rhythmic structure, and of the forward propulsion of the music, communicated more about the performers themselves than it did about either Mozart or his music . . . as though Messrs. Davis and Valdepenas were bent upon making a gourmet production out of what is a piquant little musical side-dish . . . or, in this case, *hors d'oeuvre*.

Despite all the protestations of programme annotators to the effect that the score of *Ein Deutsches Requiem* displays 'spontaneity' the truth of the matter is that to my ears the score displays all of the thick textures and turgid writing that one would expect of a composition that was worked and reworked over a period of thirteen years. Nowhere does Brahms achieve the fresh and moving simplicity that, for example, Delius managed in his similarly idiosyncratic Requiem as, for example, during the passage 'The snow lingers yet on the mountain'.

Despite the seeming variety of forces used by Brahms, in performance *Ein Deutsches Requiem* conveys little variation or creativity of scoring

(whether for instrumental or choral forces) and this combined with the perceived similarity of tempi throughout the work means that the Requiem makes its effect through the inevitability of its granitic unfolding rather than through the drama of its musical landscape. It was this aspect of the gradual unfolding of the whole that Andrew Davis projected so well in his disciplined and architecturally conceived interpretation.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the performance was the precision with which the massed choirs sang. It is testimony to the quality of the preparation and rehearsal of the four individual choirs as well as to Mr. Davis's ability to direct the large vocal forces that the choirs blended so well together and sang with such definition of tone. Only the lost consonants and the indistinct enunciation of the German words detracted from a thoroughly successful performance. This latter fault was also evident in Rosalind Plowright's singing of 'Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit'. Ms. Plowright has a large and attractive voice which seemed to fill every corner of St. David's Hall with vibrating air, but she also tended to croon the words and this not only detracted from an understanding of what she was singing but also undermined any effort that she might have made to dramatize the text. The other soloist, Benjamin Luxon, on the other hand, was a model of steadiness and clarity, if also a little wooden in his delivery of the next . . . but Brahms's unimaginative writing in such large scale compositions seems to invite that inexpressivity.

Andrew Davis coaxed some lovely sounds out of the BBC Welsh Orchestra. Of the three or four recent performances that I have heard given by that orchestra, Mr. Davis has been the most successful in bringing discipline and a delicacy and unanimity of tone to its playing. But not even he could overcome the limitations of the acoustics of St. David's Hall which lend no bloom or cohesion to much of the orchestral sound (especially top and bottom strings — the cello section of the USSR Symphony Orchestra showed that there is no problem with the middle strings). I felt the floor of the hall vibrate for the first time during the great fortissimo outburst in the second movement of the Requiem and this makes me wonder whether the problem might lie not with the volume of air nor with the materials used (the reverberation time cannot be faulted) but rather with the way in which the surfaces of the walls, floor or ceiling are fixed.

IFOR PAYNE.