

Donnerstag aus Licht review – ambitious Stockhausen staging realigns cosmic order

Royal Festival Hall, London

Symbolism, stagecraft and tap-dancing trombones
Le Balcon's impressive production of "Thursday", the
Stockhausen's epic opera cycle



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That is the meaning of Donnerstag aus Licht.” The translation came up on the screen four hours into this performance, not long after a tap-dancing trombonist had been vanquished in a duel. What – had we missed something? Hardly. Stockhausen didn’t weave such a wide, dense net of symbolism, with everyday mundanity next to Age-of-Aquarius-style talk of “cosmic co-creators”, only to tell us what it is about.

At least one of Donnerstag’s subjects is clear: Stockhausen himself. His Licht is a vast ego-trip: a cycle of seven operas, one for each day of the week. In 1980, Donnerstag was the first to be completed, and it’s here that the French group Le Balcon has started its survey, an admirably, perhaps hopelessly ambitious project due to continue with Samstag in Paris next month.

Act 1 introduces a musically gifted boy called Michael, who is transparently Stockhausen himself, and his parents, Lucifer and Eve; she becomes mentally ill and is hospitalised, like the composer’s own mother. They sing in snatched phrases, or in syllables that play with the letters of their names. But Stockhausen is at his most eloquent when he leaves out the words. Each of the three characters is represented not only by a singer but an instrumentalist and a dancer too, so Michael’s travels around the world in Act 2 are represented by a kind of trumpet concerto, here a tour de force from Henri Deléger, pacing the stage. Bassist horn player Iris Zerdoud, appearing first as a fabulously feather-fingered bird, was an equally strong presence.

The music, much of it played off stage or prerecorded, much of it of filigree delicacy, sets up an intriguing disjunction between what we see and what we hear. It was persuasively performed, with Le Balcon’s Maxime Pascal conducting massed forces drawn from the London Sinfonietta, the Royal Academy of Music and the New London Chamber Choir. Benjamin Lazar’s staging was brilliantly effective. Walking away from the hall as four trumpeters sounded a long Farewell out over the Thames, it was possible for even the previously doubtful to feel that some sort of cosmic order had been realigned.

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