

A FABULOUS OPERA FOR ANY DAY OF THE WEEK


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★★★★☆

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It is more than 40 years since Stockhausen began writing *Donnerstag aus Licht* (Thursday from Light) and nothing like it has been composed since. Well, nothing except the six other Licht operas, each with its own extraordinary demands, such as camels, helicopters, rockets and a pencil sharpener big enough for a man to climb inside.

Thursday was the first instalment and hasn't been performed in the UK since a Covent Garden staging in 1985. As part of a Stockhausen celebration at Southbank Centre, this performance came from the French group Le Balcon with additional players from the London Sinfonietta. Should the cosmic wind blow fair, Balcon's mightily impressive conductor, Maxime Pascal, intends to pull off a world first and perform all of Licht, Monday to Sunday. It would not be accurate to say that *Donnerstag* grips you from start to finish during its 200 minutes. There are many laboured indulgences, and while some of these might be given extra pizzazz with imaginative production, Benjamin Lazar's staging is a compromise. The hero, the Archangel Michael, flew around the world with some cursory video backdrops, then arrived as dancer, trumpeter and singer to the barest of celestial realms. Presumably something greater than a single spotlight is imagined for the gruelling, halting finale in which the three Michaels look back on what's happened and pontificate on good, evil and general existence.

Yet the paradox of all this epic theatre-of-the-imagination stuff is that while you need the stage wizardry to give the lift-off, it's the nuts and bolts of the piece, the intricate musical architecture, that fascinates. Act 1, a retelling of Stockhausen's childhood, finishes with an incredible, almost romantic piano solo. The love duet that concludes Act II, magnetically delivered by the trumpeter Henri Deleger (the star of the night) and the basset horn player Iris Zerdoud, is transporting. And the waves of overlapping choral voices that open the last act are as overwhelming as the subsequent appearance by a tap-dancing trombonist is simply a bizarre but incredible feat. My mind stretched almost as much as my ears, I left not intending to hear the outdoor epilogue, Thursday's Farewell, but its solemn, haunting strains followed me across the Thames from the Festival Hall's balconies, a final ray of *Licht*.

Neil Fisher

