

Fine Singing from the Zurich Sing-Akademie

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Brunner, Furrer, Bruckner: Zürcher Sing-Akademie. Soloists of the Berne Chamber Orchestra / Florian Helgath (conductor), Fraumünster Church Zurich, 18.3.2018. (JR)

Bruckner – Aequale I for 3 Trombones (WAB 114); **Aequale II** for 3 Trombones (WAB 149); Mass No. 2 in E minor (WAB 27)

Brunner – Der Mensch; Die Versuchung Jesu

Furrer – Three religious choruses from Faust I

The Zurich Sing-Akademie (or to give it its proper local title ‘The Zürcher Sing-Akademie’) was formed seven years ago to replace the then defunct Schweizer Kammerchor. The Akademie is a relatively small concert choir made up entirely of professional singers, with a core of some 24 singers. For this concert, they augmented their number to 40. They are regular accredited partners of the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich and frequently perform the vocal parts at Tonhalle Orchestra concerts.

Timothy Brown, former Music Director at Clare College Cambridge, was asked by David Zinman, former Chief Conductor of the Tonhalle Orchestra and its then Intendant Elmar Weingarten, to put together this elite group of singers, so they are very much hand-picked. Compared with the many amateur choirs in Zurich, they are a considerably younger bunch, which gives their voices freshness and vigour. Tim Brown has moved on to newer musical pastures, leaving the way for Florian Helgath to step in. Helgath is a former Regenburger Domspatz, a cathedral chorister.

This concert, given in one of Zurich’s main churches, with a backdrop of spectacular stained glass windows painted by Chagall, was an opportunity to hear how the choir is faring under their new master and to hear some unknown and known works.

We started, to get us in the mood in a freezing cold church, with a short Bruckner fanfare from his time at St. Florian in Linz, from three trombones, members of the Berne Chamber Orchestra.

Adolf Brunner (1901-1992) was Swiss and went to Berlin in 1921 to study with Franz Schreker. Brunner’s name has however disappeared from the concert hall, so it was good to hear two excellent short *a capella* pieces for choir, both of which impressed. They were not as modern nor discordant as one might expect, and I was thankful for that.

Another Swiss composer, Walter Furrer (1902-1978), was more prolific than Brunner, he even wrote two operas. We heard three scenes from *Faust*, also *a capella*; they were delightful, expertly crafted and full of interest. In the first movement, ‘Mater dolorosa’, the men hummed whilst the ladies sang; then a lively ‘Dies Irae’ and to close, most beautiful and contemplative of all, ‘Chorus ad diem festi paschae’ with soaring cries of ‘Christ ist erstanden’ from the sopranos.

After another Bruckner trombone fanfare from the organ loft, we heard Bruckner's second Mass, a lighter work than his third Mass. Bruckner composed no fewer than seven Masses (plus two Requiems, sketched two other Masses and another Requiem). The choir impressed in all registers, crystalline sopranos, warm altos, firm and secure tenors, resonant basses. Entries and exits were crisp, aided by Helgath's expert and clear conducting.

It was only a pity that the concert was poorly attended. One could blame the weather, Switzerland too being subjected to the mini-beast of the East. Snow was falling and temperatures plummeted, so that the audience wore coats and scarves. Others may have been put off by names of composers of whom they had not heard – a mistake. Others may not have been drawn by a Bruckner Mass, another mistake. They are quite a different genre from his magnificent symphonies, but equally impressive in their liturgical style. Sadly, I fear that, for varying reasons, purely choral concerts are (unless at the highest level) not drawing in the numbers which they once did.

The choir was accompanied in the Bruckner Mass by woodwind and brass players from the Berne Chamber Orchestra, who did not put a foot wrong. But it was the choir who were very much the stars of the show; they are in fine fettle under their new young command.

John Rhodes