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Quartetto Prometeo at MaerzMusik
Sophienkirche, Berlin, 24 March 2010

Maerzmusik, part of the Berlin Festspiele, is now in its ninth year. Under the artistic directorship of Matthias Osterwold, it covers the gamut of contemporary musical styles, from sound art to interactive installations, from music theatre to opera, and from intimate string quartets to cavernous orchestral music, taking in several premieres along the way.

The theme of this year's festival, UTOPIA [LOST], is concerned with the washing away of the idea of utopia in recent times by the all-engulfing tide of calculative thought. It is a timely theme, of course, and a fitting one for a new music festival. Music has always played the role of lure, presenting something suggested rather than stated, a form that is absent by its very presence; and it is in precisely these respects that music is of value to us: in being inaccessible to the boundless rapacity of the times, always set aside as if a porthole in the hull of a ship, it opens up for us otherwise unseeable vistas.

In his introductory note to the festival, Osterwold speaks of MaerzMusik as presenting, 'an exciting journey - not entirely without risk - to the [Lost] Islands of Musical Utopia where music is to be observed as the force field of the new, the unheard, the unexplored and of transgression.'

The Sophienkirche, an impressive Lutheran church, on a drizzly sunny Sunday afternoon, hosted a string quartet concert by the Quartetto Prometeo.

The opening work, with a full-to-capacity congregation, and with the performers dominated by a large cross behind them above the altar, was Scelsi's fourth string quartet. This turned out to be an inspired piece of programming.

Emphasising Prometeo's Italian heritage, its other purpose on the face of things was to serve as a brief opener - it's only around twelve minutes long - and thus a manageable introduction to the world of contemporary classical music for those who were attending the concert through curiosity about the MaerzMusik festival rather than for any particular love of contemporary music. Certainly a few in attendance were taken by surprise, and needless to say there was a smattering of early exits.

The work itself was exquisitely performed, in the sense that it was rendered lucid and sumptuous, its form taking precedence over its drama. The overwhelming impression was of a fluid, shifting sound object, perhaps like an auditory tesseract, carefully constructed and displayed in its emergence by the counterpoint of the four players. The work's aspect of harsh and even violent rending was here not stressed, and the result was a slightly detached view of Scelsi's genius, which in dissolving the traditional focus of the tradition on pitch and on the note allows the emergence of something else to take place.

Following this was Barbara Monk Feldman's Desert Space, with the composer herself listening on. A vibrato motif was coupled with atmospheric harmonics to effectively conjure up the ecology of the title. Perhaps a little too effectively though, as the work progressed from lushness in the first half to aridity in the second, and was a little too long (for hearing in a church with hard bench seats in any case). There was a curious reminiscence in the work's second half to the composer's late husband Morton Feldman's first string quartet. After the interval, Kurtag's 6 Moments musicaux op. 44 contrasted greatly with what had preceded, all pith and backwards glances to the tradition, each of the movements brief and with a distinct character. Closing proceedings and bookending the programme with another Italian work, twinning the Italian work that had opened things, Sciarrino's eighth string quartet, composed last year, received its German premiere with the composer himself in attendance. This concert gave vent to Quartetto Prometeo's technical excellence and sense of programming creativity, and it will be interesting to see how the Arditti Quartet's concert later in the week compares with it.

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