Friday 19 June, 2015, 7.30pm. Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford.

**Maxim Vengerov and Oxford Philomusica:**

**Sibelius** Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47 (original 1904 version)

**Hector Berlioz**, *Symphonie fantastique*. *Épisode de la vie d’un artiste en cinq parties*. Op. 14



***‘Polar bears dance and cauldrons bubble: white-hot energy from Vengerov and the Oxford Philomusica in a programme of Sibelius and Berlioz’.***

On Friday 19th June, Maxim Vengerov played the Sibelius Violin Concerto and conducted Berlioz’s *Symphonique Fantastique* with the Oxford Philomusica at the Sheldonian Theatre. As the Philomusica’s first Artist in Residence, Vengerov has already performed with them the Britten, Brahms and Tchaikovsky violin concertos, and given recitals of the music of Franck, Saint-Saëns and Ysaÿe1. He also took to the podium in Mendelssohns’s ‘Scottish Symphony’ and again for Brahms’s Piano Concerto no 2, with the Philomusica’s conductor and music director, Marios Papadopoulos, as soloist. A recording with the Oxford Philomusica of Brahms’s violin concerto and Mendelssohn’s ‘Scottish’ will be released later this year under Vengerov’s new label, VMV (Vengerov Music Vision).

Friday night’s concert was a sell-out. Many had come to hear the original 1904 scoring of Sibelius’s Violin Concerto, Vengerov being one of only a few violinists in history granted permission to play it. When first performed, this version was not at all well-received. Sibelius had barely completed the work in time for the February première, and as a consequence the soloist, Viktor Nováček who was substituting Willy Burmester, was underprepared. The work was withdrawn, there were substantial cuts and revisions, and the new version was performed in October 1905 with Karl Halíř, the leader of the Berlin Philharmonic, as soloist, and Richard Strauss conducting. Although a lot of the 1904 version is identical to the revised work – for example, the beginning, the coda, and the short cadenza of the first movement; parts of the second movement, and most of the third - the original is longer and includes themes deleted in the 1905 account. On the whole, the original version is more noticeably difficult.

There are those who interpret the Sibelius as the last of the great Romantic concertos, and there are those who see it as the precursor of a darker, more disturbing twentieth-century tradition. Whereas Vengerov’s 2011 recording of the work with Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra veered toward the former interpretation, his rendition with the Oxford Philomusica had a more modern resonance with a rawer edge, emphasizing the underlying angst which is clearly evident in the original score. The opening solo, executed with a sparing use of vibrato, was tinged with a sense of quiet desolation, immediately evocative of the cold and ice of Sibelius’s Nordic atmosphere. The entry was carefully carved, heralding the sense of shape which Vengerov and Papadopoulus endeavoured to extract from this more unwieldy score where the sheer volume of virtuosic material (as in the long, eclectic-sounding second cadenza) tended sometimes to blur the coherency of Sibelius’s vision. In contrast to the muscular passages, dispatched by Vengerov with assurance and vigour, there were beautiful moments of miraculous stillness, and the balance, although difficult to maintain, was successfully achieved by this receptive orchestra which strove to keep the soloist centre stage, not too near nor too far.

The *Adagio* breathed conviction as Vengerov’s dark tone sang soulfully through the peaks and troughs until the erotic charge of the second big climax. Again, the solo part was more replete with quicksilver virtuosity than in the revised score, culminating in yet another short cadenza.

The third movement, famously described, in a positive context, by Donald Tovey as ‘a polonaise for polar bears’, has been taken by some at a blistering speed (Heifetz, Christian Ferras, and notably, the young Norwegian violinist, Vilde Frang, in her acclaimed 2009 account for EMI) but other greats like Ida Haendal and David Oistrakh adhere to Sibelius’s marking ‘Allegro, *ma non tanto*’ (my italics) and what, arguably, they lose in excitement, they gain in clarity of detail. Vengerov was in the latter camp: his up-bow staccato double stops, treble stops, perfectly forged thirds, jumping octaves and harmonics were a series of forces to be reckoned with. The movement had a white-hot energy, an unstoppable momentum , the ‘polar bears’ danced, and the audience loved it.

After the interval it was time to brace oneself for the dramatics of Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*, with its depiction of romantic infatuation, an opium-induced hallucination, murder, decapitation, and a witches’ sabbath. The symphony, inspired by the composer’s obsessive love for the Irish Shakespearean actress, Harriet Smithson (whom he eventually married) was the first of its kind in many ways: it revolutionized the symphonic form with its introduction of new textures and instruments, and it brought the theatre into the concert hall with its programmatic depiction of 5 episodes ‘in the life of an artist’, thereby pre-empting the ‘symphonic poems’ of later composers. The 5 episodes were clearly outlined by Berlioz himself in the notes that he handed out to the audience at the première, a practice unheard of before. These explain how a young Artist, suffering from unrequited love, poisons himself with opium and has a delirious dream in which he kills his beloved, is marched to the scaffold, and witnesses his own execution.

Brilliantly led by Natalia Lomeiko, the Oxford Philomusica’s was a rich and impassioned account. In the first movement (‘Rêveries, passions’), violins and solo flute floated wistfully in the initial appearance of the ‘*idee fixe*’ – the elusive theme which represents the object of the Artist’s love and which permeates every movement, although in a different form. There were superb colour-contrasts in the depiction of the Protagonist’s mood swings: moments of tenderness and vulnerability alternating with sudden outbursts of frustration and despair.

For the second movement (‘Un bal’) we were transported to the glamour of a 19th-century ballroom. The Artist fantasizes about dancing with his beloved, as suggested by the interweaving of the ‘*idée fixe’* with the waltz theme. The harps sang out full-toned and the waltz had a lilt and spirit, capturing a sense of glittering refinement.

In ‘Scène aux champs’ our Hero finds some temporary relief from his anguish in the countryside. There was a lovely ‘French’ feel here: the pastoral scene, in the hands of Vengerov, shimmering, like an impressionist painting, with sunshine and warmth. In spite of the echoes to Beethoven’s *Pastoral* (the same key of F major; the cry of the quail) one was conscious of the orchestra’s attempt to draw out, not the happy celebration of nature that was Beethoven’s, but a sense of painful solitude, beautifully suggested in the cor anglais and ‘off-stage’ oboe duet, evoking two distant Swiss herdsmen piping to each other, the last pipe call remaining unanswered.

Some chillingly precise playing characterized the ‘March au supplice’ where massive brass and percussion and grotesque bassoons playing in their highest registers joined forces to march the Artist to the scaffold. The clarinet’s last, pitiable attempt to reiterate the ‘*idée fixe*’ is brutally cut off by the guillotine blade, represented by an abrupt G minor chord of such potency that it had more than a few jumping in their seats. The *pizzicato* strings then made sure we saw a head roll into the basket.

In the final movement, ‘Songe d’une nuit du Sabbat’, inspired by the assembly of witches in Victor Hugo’s ‘Odes et Ballades’, the shrill E-flat clarinet (played by David Rix) gave a brilliantly parodic version of the beloved’s theme, now a vulgar, cackling tune. The parody continued as the tubular bells rang out for the *Dies Irae* and then merged with the witches’ round dance in a *tour de force* of rhythmic and orchestral virtuosity. There were delicious moments, such as when the skeletons danced before our eyes in the *col legno* passage for violins and violas, and a real edge-of-your-seat excitement as Vengerov whipped the orchestra into a frenzied and terrifying conclusion. Brass and percussion can quite easily overwhelm everything in the finale, but the Philomusica achieved a great sense of balance with the woodwind and strings and sustained the nightmare to the very end.

When, on 16 December, 1838, Paganini attended a performance of the *Fantastique* at the Paris Conservatoire, with the sickly and impoverished Berlioz conducting, the violinist, literally speechless from the disease of the larynx which eventually killed him, fell to his knees and kissed the conductor’s hand. Two days later, Paganini delivered the destitute Berlioz 20,000 francs ‘as a token of ‘his’ homage’.2  Only a dramatically thrilling performance of the work can elicit such an impulsive reaction. After Friday night’s performance of the *Fantastique* with Vengerov and the Oxford Philomusica, I was happy to be able to comprehend more fully what had prompted Paganini’s spontaneous and magnanimous response.

***Professor Vivienne Suvini-Hand.***

1. Reviewed here: <http://bachtrack.com/review-dec-2013-oxford-phil-vengerov>

See also my reviews of Vengerov’s Barbican Residency, 2014:

‘Stately fun and Stormy Exoticism: all in a night at the Barbican’:

<http://bachtrack.com/review-march-2014-vengerov-scheherazade?destination=%2F>;

‘Music of woods, warfare and wizardry: Vengerov and Golan at the Barbican’ (Bachtrack, 10 Jan, 2014).

<http://bachtrack.com/review-jan-2014-barbican-vengerov-golan>

1. Berlioz recounts the story in Chapter 40 of his Memoirs. See *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, translated by David Cairns (St Albans: Granada Publishing Ltd, 1970), pp. 299-305.