


 THE
 CRITICS

Shock of the old

Hot-off-the-press commissions at the Proms were no match for Mahler and Schoenberg, says *Paul Driver*

It was fairly cataclysmic at the Royal Albert Hall to hear Mahler's choral-orchestral Symphony No 2, the "Resurrection", and Schoenberg's immense Gurrelieder cantata on consecutive evenings. The rafters held, but they should not have done, so mighty were these performances, single-item Proms, the first given by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (with the Bach Choir) under Sakari Oramo, the second by the London Symphony Orchestra and its Chorus, with the CBSO Chorus and Orfeo Catala – all three trained by Simon Halsey – under Simon Rattle.

The works were written – or, in Schoenberg's case, the protracted compositional process began – within six years of each other at the end of the 19th century. It is rather astonishing that they speak to us so imperatively now. Their modernity has not abated: they seem far more urgent utterances than brand-new pieces at the Proms, even when the latter address topical issues and burn with a conscientious passion, as does Mark-Anthony Turnage's choral-orchestral Hibiki, which had its European premiere from the BBCSO with the Finchley Children's Music Group and New London Children's Choir, conducted by Kazushi Ono.

Completed in 2014, this 50-minute, seven-movement essay was commissioned by Suntory Hall, in Tokyo, to mark its 30th anniversary in 2016, and two of the four movements that set words use Japanese verse (in

one case a translation of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star), while a third is an English translation from a Bunraku play and a fourth – the finale – relies for text on just one (chorally reiterated) word, "Fukushima". That is the name of the area in which nuclear reactors were damaged by the earthquake and tsunami of 2011, a catastrophe Hibiki – which means "resonance" or "beautiful sound" – seeks to record, alongside an evocation of the firebombing of Tokyo in 1945, the subject of So Sakon's poem Hashitte iru (Running), memorably adapted for a hysterically pattering Anglo-Japanese vocal duo of soprano (Sally Matthews) and mezzo-soprano (Mihoko Fujimura).

This struck me as the most vivid movement, its unstoppable apparent brio actually conveying sheer terror; but all are executed with Turnage's familiar brilliant

accomplishment. The purely orchestral opening movement, named Iwate after one of the places hit by the tsunami, is devastating indeed in its large-scale activation of rhythm. The positioning of the fifth-movement Suntory Dance – ambiguous dithyramb among the threnodies – was striking; and the use of children's voices is at once touching and, given that they alone embody such an ambitious choral statement, an original touch.

The influence of Britten may be detectable, as generally in Turnage,

but has been well absorbed. Curious, though, that the Britten piece surely closest to him – the Sinfonia da Requiem (1940), with its distinctive saxophone line and its elegising, for both of which Turnage has his own penchant – should have been a Japanese government commission, albeit rejected by them for its Christianity and mournfulness.

New works at the Proms by the Austrian Thomas Larcher (his Nocturne – Insomnia, a 15-minute score for 16 instruments, given its British premiere by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra under Robin Ticciati) and the Irishman Gerald Barry, whose BBC-commissioned Canada the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra unveiled under Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla's direction, were very different in tone from the mainstream-sounding Turnage, and from each other. Larcher hits on a strange, new, perhaps temporary language that seems to lie between tonality and its challengers, and evokes that old musical cliché of the night with an arresting compact freshness and peculiar atmosphere. He calls on what was the largest bass drum I've ever seen, but uses it sparingly.

As for the Barry – a setting for both tenor (Allan Clayton) and the speaking players of a handful of words from the Prisoners' Chorus in Beethoven's Fidelio, with "Canada!" bizarrely appended and babyishly broken into syllables – it appeared to want to



make mincemeat of any kind of bold
creative endeavour. After Gurrelieder
(its own speech part lent
unforgettable intensity by
Thomas Quasthoff), it was
certainly surreal to be
encountering such parodic,
wilfully reductive, if briefly
exhilarating, orchestral
writing. This was true
musical Dada. 