


Seen and Heard International

 Austria **Schulhoff, Flothuis, Haas, Zeisl, Smit**: Kammermusikgruppe Atout, Max Müller (readings). Musikverein (Glass Hall), Vienna. 4.11.2015. (SS)

Erwin Schulhoff – Concertino for flute, viola and double bass

Marius Flothuis – ‘Aubade’ for solo flute, op. 19a

Pavel Haas – Study for strings

Eric Zeisl – *Arrowhead*. Trio for flute, viola and harp

Leo Smit – Quintet for flute, violin, viola, cello and harp

After a ‘Weimar-Leningrad’-themed Klangforum event the previous week at the RadioKulturhaus, this Exil.Arte concert of suppressed composers proceeded on a more trans-European basis: five composers of Czech, Austrian and Dutch extraction, their careers all derailed – and for Schulhoff, Haas and Smits, lives cut short – by the Third Reich. The coordination between Exil.Arte, a research center affiliated with Vienna’s University of Music and Performing Arts, and the chamber ensemble Atout resulted, on balance, in a program more even in quality than the Klangforum’s cooperation with Amaury du Clouzel’s Forums Voix Etouffées, albeit with no one piece as overflowing with mad ebullience and expressive depth as Stefan Wolpe’s Concerto for Nine Instruments (heard at the Klangforum event with a newly completed violin part by Austin Clarkson).

The opening and closing works of this program brought the presence of sounds from an imagined East, and not even with the flute as the main culprit. Schulhoff’s Concertino opens with a hypnotic dialogue enacted by the flute intricately weaving in and out of a pentatonic ostinato carried by the two strings. This goes around in circles before the texture thickens, momentum kicks in, and the music is suddenly over – an asymmetry concealed, rather than marked, in this performance. The more conventional third and fourth movements are textbook Andante and finale stuff. The piece peaks in the second movement, where the three Atout musicians vibrantly put across the parodic continuation of the pentatonic line (in the manner of the Diabelli Variations), underscored by snappy folk rhythms.

The orientalist impulse in Leo Smit's 1928 Quintet for flute, string trio and harp, more decorative than thematic, is just one gauzy element in a piece derivative of Ravel's Introduction and Allegro. Its craft is a funny thing, challenging the notion that an accomplished piece of composition will always register satisfactorily in performance as an accomplished piece of composition. This Quintet is that on paper, and in performance a few degrees short of outright impressive with stubborn glass half-empty persistence. Smit just seems disinterested in levelling Ravel up, despite the facility to have given it a go. Again, the ensemble impressed, conveying a brawnier, slightly more Flemish impressionism with colouristic effects that duly swirled.

Eric Zeisl's *Arrowhead* à la Atout sounded like a weird curio: cartoon bunnies skipping through a hyperreal field with fairytale innocence. By the end you wanted to give it a Mahler injection (the performance, that is). Nostalgia isn't the right word for this placid score; unlike Stefan Zweig (who cropped up in 'World of Yesterday' mode in the evening's readings, recited with great range by actor Max Müller) it doesn't hark back to the old world. Inspired by Zeisl's summer vacations at California's Lake Arrowhead, its transplanted roots in the new world evoke Michael Haas's definition of exile music as the music of dislocation, which could not have been written in the composer's native land, nor by any composer native to the country of exile.

A lightness to the neo-Bachian flavor of Zeisl's outer movements was possibly an after-effect of Pavel Haas's Study for Strings, a Theresienstadt work given here in a propulsive but academic reading, the weight of the piece lying with the fugue rather than the central adagio. Marius Flothuis's pleasant 'Aubade' for solo flute is a bit thin in terms of character but makes clever use of implied suspensions which support longer phrases than usual for the genre, with listeners not too aurally stretched to fill in their own 'Kopfharmone'.

A timely concert, of exile experiences which added up to something, however belated their appreciation. The backlash against the present-day exiles in our midst is currently underway in Austria; now the national conversation, if it can be called that, is about how wide, high, and senseless the border fence will be. Empathy for the estrangement and mutilations wrought by displacement is waning, as the process of belittling the refugee population's cultural capital begins in earnest. Will we be deaf too, to their voices, their experiences of exile?

Seb Smallshaw