

Edinburgh International Festival Review: Bamberg Symphony Orchestra/Jonathan Nott (****)

☒ The first of the Bamberg Symphony Orchestra's concerts took the bold decision of contrasting music by two of the 20th century's most distinctive voices – Bartók and Messiaen. While the festival's Asian theme was well represented – both in Messiaen's Japanese-inspired *Sept haïkaï* and the expressionistic orientalism of Bartók's ballet music *The Miraculous Mandarin* – the combination perhaps seemed too challenging to potential audiences, as the turnout was shamefully poor.

Still, anyone put off by such a seemingly hardcore mixture missed out on some thrilling music, and some excellent performances. British conductor Jonathan Nott has led the Bamberg orchestra since 2000, and his twin loves of large-scale Romantic music and more challenging contemporary sounds (he was music director of crack French new-music group Ensemble Intercontemporain for three years) could clearly be felt in these performances.

His Messiaen was precise, crisp and seemingly effortless. *Chronochromie* is a large-scale piece from 1960 whose title means something like 'the colour of time', and Messiaen duly fills the work's duration with glittering birdsong in virtuosic percussion parts, towering, radiant chords from the brass, and glowing halos of sound in the strings. Nott's performance was full of vibrant life, his rhythms – always so important in Messiaen – exact, and his chord voicing finely controlled. He was sometimes a little breathless in dashing from one section to the next, thereby robbing the music of

some of its monumental character, but he nevertheless imbued the work with plenty of energy and impetus.

The *Sept haïkaï* that followed, Messiaen's response to a trip to Japan in 1962, again combines the composer's beloved birdsong with depictions of Buddhist temples, Shinto sea gateways and the astringent court music, gagaku. Pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard was his usual faultless self in the demanding solo piano part, especially gripping in the thundering birdsong of the 'Yamanaka – cadenza' movement. Nott's reading was stately, bordering at times on the cold and uninvolved, but still characterised by precision and energy.

☒ Nott seemed more in his element in Bartók's massive *Miraculous Mandarin*, controlling the forces of a huge orchestra, chorus and organ to tell the seedy story of a prostitute and her strange clients. While his depiction of the woman's despatching of her first two potential customers was appropriately vicious, her final pursuit by the eponymous Mandarin seemed a little lacklustre: for all the meticulous preparation and eloquent playing, there was little sense of threat and danger. Still, Nott's storytelling was colourful and supple, and the Bamberg players painted some vivid sound pictures.