Beat: Arts

Edinburgh International Festival Closing Concert – Capriccio

Usher Hall

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USPA NEWS - Edinburgh International Festival concert closes off the Festival with the Philharmonia Orchestra residency.
Alexander Soddy Conductor
David Jones Assistant Conductor

Malin Byström Countess
Bo Skovhus Count
Sebastian Kohlhepp Flamand
Joshua Hopkins Olivier
Peter Rose La Roche
Dame Sarah Connolly Clairon
Emma Morwood Italian Singer
John Irvin Italian Singer
Reinhard Hagen Major Domo
Strauss Capriccio

The Edinburgh International Festival's performance of Richard Strauss's Capriccio by the Philharmonia Orchestra under the baton of Alexander Soddy was an extraordinary evening that blended music and drama with a distinctly elegant touch.

Orchestra & Conductors:
The Philharmonia Orchestra, renowned for its nuanced performances, was in top form, delivering Strauss's intricate and lush score with remarkable clarity and depth. Under Alexander Soddy's precise and sensitive direction, the orchestra managed to bring out the subtleties of Strauss's late-Romantic textures while maintaining a dynamic balance between the singers and the instrumentalists. Soddy's interpretation was both faithful to the score and imbued with a personal touch, ensuring that the music never overpowered the vocal performances. David Jones, the assistant conductor, played a vital supporting role, ensuring the overall cohesion of the performance.

Vocal Performances:
Malin Byström, as the Countess, gave a performance that was both vocally sublime and emotionally resonant. Her portrayal was marked by a deep understanding of the character's complexity, navigating the Countess's inner turmoil with grace and nuance. Byström's voice, rich and versatile, handled the demanding score effortlessly, shining particularly in the reflective final monologue.

Bo Skovhus brought a robust and commanding presence to the role of the Count. His vocal performance was powerful yet controlled, providing a strong counterpart to Byström's Countess. As Flamand, Sebastian Kohlhepp's lyrical tenor voice added a layer of tenderness and vulnerability, contrasting effectively with Joshua Hopkins's more assertive and impassioned Olivier.

Peter Rose's La Roche was a highlight, with his booming bass voice capturing the character's grandeur and underlying warmth. Dame Sarah Connolly was a scene-stealer as Clairon, bringing her well-known dramatic flair and vocal precision to the role, making every appearance memorable. The Italian Singers, Emily Birsan and John Irvin, added a delightful touch of levity, their voices blending beautifully in their duet. Reinhard Hagen's Major Domo was a solid anchor in the ensemble, his deep voice resonating with authority.

Overall Impression:
The performance of Capriccio was a testament to the collaborative effort of all involved. The Philharmonia Orchestra, under Soddy's expert direction, and a cast of exceptional singers brought Strauss's final opera to life with elegance and emotional depth. The production successfully captured the essence of Strauss's meditation on the relationship between words and music, leaving the audience with a profound appreciation for the art of opera. The evening was not just a musical performance but a thoughtful exploration of art's eternal questions, presented with grace and expertise.

About the Edinburgh International Festival
"This year the Edinburgh International Festival celebrates Rituals That Unite Us as we inaugurate new and reimagined rituals, in a programme that will bring artists and audiences closer together than ever before. We invite you to seek and gather with us this August."
– Nicola Benedetti, Festival Director

"Capriccio" is an opera by the German composer Richard Strauss, with a libretto by Clemens Krauss and Strauss himself. It is Strauss's final opera and premiered on October 28, 1942, at the Nationaltheater in Munich.

Overview:
Composer: Richard Strauss
Librettists: Clemens Krauss and Richard Strauss
Premiere: October 28, 1942, Munich
Genre: Opera (lyrical conversation piece)
Plot Summary:
"Capriccio" is unique in its focus on the meta-question of the relationship between words and music in opera, rather than a traditional narrative. Set in a château near Paris in the 18th century, it revolves around the Countess Madeleine, who is torn between two suitors: the poet Olivier and the composer Flamand. The opera explores the age-old debate in opera about which is more important: the words (represented by Olivier) or the music (represented by Flamand).

The opera ends ambiguously with the Countess unable to decide between her suitors, symbolizing the ongoing debate about the primacy of words versus music in opera.

Significance:
"Capriccio" is often noted for its intellectual and aesthetic sophistication, reflecting Strauss's deep engagement with the art form and the traditions of opera. It is considered a "conversation piece" and is sometimes referred to as a "final farewell" to the art of opera by Strauss, as it was his last work in the genre.

Musical Style:
The opera is known for its rich orchestration, characteristic of Strauss, and its blending of conversational dialogue with lush, lyrical passages. The music is intricate and elegant, reflecting the high society setting of the story and the intellectual themes being discussed.

Key Themes:
Words vs. Music: The central theme is the relationship and balance between words (libretto) and music in opera.
Artistic Creation: The opera delves into the nature of artistic creation and the collaboration between different artistic disciplines.
Love and Choice: While the intellectual debate is the main focus, there is also an underlying theme of romantic choice, embodied in the Countess's indecision.
"Capriccio" stands as a sophisticated, reflective work, bringing together the themes of love, art, and the nature of opera itself, making it a fitting conclusion to Strauss's illustrious career in opera.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:
United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local
(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com
www.gna24.com