Berlioz

Symphonie fantastique op. 14
Harold en Italie op. 16

Tabea Zimmerman *va*, Christoph Eschenbach *cond*
Orchestre de Paris

Bel Air Classiques DVD 016 (103 minutes: PCM Stereo)

This DVD brings home with unusual force the problems inherent in the medium. Music before the age of recording was composed for live performance, and for the majority who can see, and who choose not to close their eyes (naturally for greater concentration rather than sleep), that was how it was always heard – and seen. It is salutary to be reminded of what we miss when we listen to a recording or broadcast, without seeing the performers. Nevertheless, the visual dimension self-evidently matters less than the aural. The latter may be enthralling without any visual parallel (as on a CD), but, if one can imagine such a thing being offered, the visual element in music of symphonic duration, deprived of sound, would not only be tedious, but meaningless. I have heard it argued that, where possible, one should only listen to recordings while following a score, a substitute form of visualization and one of evident educational value. The onus is on the visual artists behind a television recording or DVD to enhance the musical experience, by providing information, by a visual analogy to the sound, or by a more reticent approach that provides something equivalent, though never identical, to the experience of attending a live event.

The musical performances on this recording are naturally highly competent, with considerable rhythmic vitality and plenty of bold colour. By way of information, each movement is preceded by its title: no problem in *Harold en Italie*, where titles were all Berlioz provided. In *Symphonie fantastique*, however, we get only a selection from the programme, surely a missed opportunity to connect Berlioz's words to his music; but the programme is not even printed in the accompanying notes. There are no visual analogies, using images suggested by the music from outside the performance space (a 'Scène aux champs', for instance); everything is done within the Salle Pleyel, although little is made of it as a space apart from occasional overhead views. An exception is made for the bells in the 'Songe d'une nuit de Sabbat', where a whiskered gentleman is observed in a sepulchral grey light, possibly (this isn't clear) because he is playing the orchestral bells. But the bells we see are church bells, and the same one apparently plays both c″ and g′ (this is obviously impossible; and in any case this is an octave above the highest notes Berlioz specified). The oboe in the 'Scène aux champs' responds to the cor anglais, apparently from a distance, but where the player is situated is again unclear, as he is seen close up. The live audience (which is present, applauding each symphony) would have the advantage of experiencing the spatial distance Berlioz wanted from a fixed position.

Camera-work designed for viewing on a screen should take advantage of being able to complement the music with interesting, attractive or informative images of the musicians. Unfortunately, these films seem determined to reject even this more modest aim, one fulfilled with considerable success in the BBC's

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televised promenade concerts, in which the camera-work has clear pertinence. One does not ask for Mickey-Mouse editing, switching instrument with each entry, but some sense that there is sense behind activity of the cameras would be welcome. Instead, we are plied with apparently random sequences of images of musicians taken from diverse angles, mostly not available to the audience: a free counterpoint that distracts, and detracts, from the listening experience. The pictures flit about without connection to the form, phrasing, or the instruments playing prominent roles. Admittedly, the cameras do sometimes find a woodwind soloist, but often only midway through the solo, during the first part of which we are typically supplied with images of the conductor or the string sections. Sometimes we see musicians not playing; and while this is admittedly all part of the experience of an orchestra, there is no visible bar-counting and no other reason for the attention being paid to these particular faces. Some images are of the bottom of a violin; the upward thrust of a bow shows that the player in question has ignored Berlioz's direction, at the start of the 'Ronde du Sabbat', to play *a punta d'arco*.

The problem for me is an obsession with close-up. Only rarely do we see whole images of individual musicians with their instruments. An oboe reed, a horn mouthpiece, the cor anglais crook, are all of interest, if you can bear close images of mouths doing their work; so is the massive clapper of an ophicleide. But time might be given to making a visual relation between these and the whole person or the whole instrument. Too often the most striking image is facial hair.

In a modern concert, of the kind rooted in Berlioz's own time, we expect to see a lot of the soloist and the maestro on the podium. In a DVD there is no need for such overwhelming concentration. In *Harold*, attention is rightly directed to the solo viola, but we still see a great deal of the conductor; we seldom see Tabea Zimmermann's face and instrument, bow and fingers, working together to produce her refined and often beautiful playing (although the sound is a little harsh in *forte*). The chance is lost to show how the *sul ponticello* sound is achieved in the second movement.

No doubt viewing these substantial and complex symphonic works might teach us something about conducting, but what appears here is that in performance, as distinct from rehearsal, most of what the conductor does is routine time-beating, achieving nothing that experienced players could not have managed on their own. There are also facial expressions that respond to the music, but contribute nothing to it. We see the conductor offering cues, without seeing to whom they are directed. In the 'Pilgrims' March' of *Harold en Italie*, Christoph Eschenbach's flick of the left wrist brings in the booming bell-imitation of the horns (the famously aberrant C♮); but we are not shown the horns. (Yet the response, the high bell-imitation on flute, is illustrated, though without the harp.) An opportunity is missed to enlighten those who might benefit most from a DVD, and thus learn something about Berlioz's orchestral magic. In short, the filming seems to lack a musical *raison d'être*; and any independent visual purpose is defeated by the restriction of means (keeping only to images of the musicians) and the sheer length of the music.

The visual element is dominated by Eschenbach, whose emphatic gestures are not always synchronized with what we hear. That apparently early downbeats, and occasional circular movements, have no deleterious effect on the music is hardly a reason for showing them in such profusion, and well before the end of the introduction to the first movement in each symphony one tires of the 'expressive' features, the nodding head, and the maestro's necessarily repetitious

gestures, even when viewed from all kinds of angles. The camera ungallantly shows Eschenbach's non-adherence to Henry Wood's precept that conductors should not sweat – never an easy rule to keep, but lapses can usually be concealed from the audience in a concert hall. Zimmermann is among the musicians shown while resting, and not every facial nuance seems to be occasioned by the music going on around her. When she is playing, her features are often obscured by artily out-of-focus hand-flapping from the conductor. Often enough, the hands are all we get, apparently disembodied and reminiscent of something from the saga of the Addams family. She, and Berlioz, deserve better.

Julian Rushton
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Brahms

Trio in A minor for Viola, Cello and Piano op. 114
Viola Sonata in F minor op. 120, no. 1
Viola Sonata in E♭ major op. 120, no. 2

Lawrence Power *va*, Tim Hugh *vc*, Simon Crawford-Phillips *pf*

Hyperion Records CDA67584 (65 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

The story of Brahms's encounter with the clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld has decidedly fairy-tale overtones. Brahms had announced his retirement to his publisher Fritz Simrock in December 1890, declaring 'quite generally, it is time to stop'.[1] All thoughts of retirement, however, were quickly dispensed with several months later, when he attended a performance given by Mühlfeld at the court in Meiningen. Galvanized by the clarinettist's playing, Brahms was filled with a new lease of creative energy, inspired not only to resurrect his compositional career but also to return to the concert platform. He returned from Bad Ischl at the end of the summer of 1891 with the Trio op. 114 and Quintet op. 115 in tow, and put aside his long-held aversion to performing in public in order to play these and later the two sonatas op. 120, published in 1895, with Mühlfeld. This late burst of creativity not only contributed four of the cornerstones of the clarinet repertoire, it also broadened the horizons of the long-neglected viola. The Trio and two sonatas were also published in a viola arrangement and it is in this version that the three works are presented on this Hyperion recording.

Although the sonatas in particular are central to the viola repertoire, the viola arrangements have never enjoyed the popularity of their clarinet counterparts, a circumstance that is due, at least in part, to the intrinsic role of the clarinet in their conception. Mühlfeld's playing was a genuine discovery for Brahms, who had previously paid little attention to the solo qualities of the instrument. He described Mühlfeld's clarinet playing in raptures as 'absolutely the best I

[1] Styra Avins, ed., *Johannes Brahms: Life and Letters*, trans. Avins and Josef Eisinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 674.

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