



# A strange odyssey

A new Eotvos cycle blends Homer, Joyce and Kafka, with curious results. By Paul Driver

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igmore Hall's admirable Under 35s Scheme, extending £5 tickets for a generous selection of concerts to that age group, helped create an audience for what might easily have been a sparsely attended programme centred on works by the Hungarian composer-conductor Peter Eotvos (b1944). He is prolific and successful, especially operatically, but not essentially well known, and this recital by the Los Angeles-based **Calder Quartet** and the Finnish soprano Piia Komi involved a deep immersion in his neomodernist style, with just Debussy's String Quartet for light relief.

Eotvos's own first quartet (1992), entitled *Korrespondenz*, preceded it, and proved a most unusual, if less than satisfying, experience. He means it as a "mini-opera", and its three parts or scenes supposedly enact a dialogue between Mozart, living in Paris in 1778, and his father at home in Salzburg. The cello, we were informed, takes the latter role, and Mozart is personified, aptly enough, by his favoured viola: the player, Jonathan Moerschel, occupied the usual position of the first violin, an arrangement I hadn't previously seen.

Of course, without being told of Eotvos's intentions, one would have no clue about all this; and even apprised of them, they seemed bordering on the facetious. There was much instrumental playfulness (violins bowed like cellos), imitated speech rhythm, a robust cacophony and a climax I took to be the moment Mozart learns that his mother died while he was away. But the Debussy work, beautifully played, felt oddly like the start of the concert proper, as though *Korrespondenz* were mere preliminary business.

The second half was devoted to the premiere of a substantial Wigmore co-commission from Eotvos, *The Sirens Cycle*. For this opus, another three-part quasi-opera, now for quartet with coloratura soprano, he lighted on three texts about those island seductresses in *The Odyssey*: Homer's own (in ancient Greek), Joyce's evocation in the verbal "fugue" in *Ulysses* beginning "Bronze

by gold heard the hooftrons" (where the Sirens are Dublin barmaids), and a Kafka parable in which it is Odysseus, his ears plugged with wax, who threatens to undo the (actually silent) Sirens, rather than the other way round.

The trilingual collocation was interesting, if a touch hifalutin, but there was a daunting amount of text to get through, and the Joycean first part was itself subdivided into seven. "Scordatura" string retuning was among the extreme gestures called for by an idiom of fierce, glassy expressionism, strenuous to a fault, with a soprano line regularly entering the wineglass-shattering top register. Few words could accordingly be made out, though Komi was certainly impressive. As a monodrama dealing in the musical vocabulary, if not the subject matter, of derangement, *The Sirens Cycle* seemed a good deal less pertinent than Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, which predates it by more a century. The concert was altogether curious.



At the Barbican, the **BBC Symphony Orchestra** was conducted by Sakari Oramo in a concert that attempted a large-scale blending of speech and music, not in the manner of Schoenberg's "*Sprechstimme*" declamation,

nor that of Eotvos's silvery coloratura version, but by blatantly, and I think misguidedly, running a play — Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* — alongside incidental music written for it, a rare score by the French late-Romanticist Florent Schmitt. Five actors from the Globe theatre, headed by Simon Paisley Day and Janie Dee in the title roles, were directed by Iqbal Khan in Bill Barclay's drastic condensation of the text.

The words, already part distorted by inescapable amplification, went for nothing when a full sub-Straussian tutti flung into action, as it did much of the time. The music was stylistically flattening in any case, and the six big movements of Schmitt's two concert suites (1920) were used indiscriminately — not so much incidentally as inappropriately — to make an effect. But it was a bad effect, and both play and score seemed demeaned by the treatment. The great tragedy ended in farce. The audience laughed as Cleopatra dragged her lover's body across the stage, and her self-dispatching belonged, like the general soundtrack, to the circus. ■

