

Twentieth Century Oceans

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In the aftermath of the second world war, modern architecture reached a decisive moment. The diverse threads of functionalism, rationalism and minimalism – now largely cleansed of the mysticism that had afflicted some of the earliest interwar modernists – had wound themselves into something resembling a new architectural mainstream, and it was, to a large extent, the principles of modernism that would serve as a guide in the reconstruction of post-war European cities. While some towns attempted to build exact copies of the pre-war urban spaces that had been lost, many of the larger cities – at least initially – sought to make a break from the established forms of the past.

In the western world, music was experiencing a similar upheaval, with a new generation of composers attempting to free their works from the structures and harmonic foundations that had become entrenched over the previous three centuries. It was this historical moment – centred roughly in the 1950s and 60s – that formed the theme of the recent concert series and exhibition organised by the Berlin Philharmonic. In focussing on the music of György Ligeti – and, implicitly, on the architecture of Hans Scharoun, whose Philharmonie will celebrate its 60th anniversary this year – the series offered an examination of two artists who, in very different ways, managed to transcend the mainstream of modernism from which their works nominally arose.

The first of the two programmes from the Berlin Philharmonic – devised by Kirill Petrenko, but conducted by Daniel Harding after illness forced Mr Petrenko to withdraw – attempted to situate Ligeti's two greatest orchestral scores, *Lontano* and *Atmosphères*, within the context of impressionism. François-Xavier Roth took a very similar approach in a concert from 2018 (also with the Berlin Philharmonic), alternating the three movements of Debussy's *Images pour orchestre* with Ligeti's works to great effect. The programme on this evening interspersed the two Ligeti works with three different ocean-themed works: Sibelius' *Oceanides*, the *Sea Interludes* from Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Debussy's *La Mer*. Yet if the programme had intended to highlight the affinities that existed between Ligeti and the oceanic evocations from the earlier part of the century, the performances



Daniel Harding con la Berliner Philharmoniker © 2022 by Priska Ketterer_Lucernefestival
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Philharmonie Berlin. Sibelius: The Oceanides. Ligeti: Lontano. Britten: Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes. Ligeti: Atmosphères. Debussy: La Mer. Berlin Philharmonic. Daniel Harding, conductor

served mostly to underscore the vast gulf that existed between them.

The *Oceanides*, although not perhaps as celebrated (or frequently performed) as Sibelius' major tone poems, contains passages of elemental majesty that bear the unmistakable stamp of their composer. From the opening bars of calm drift Mr Harding allowed a crisp rhythm to emerge, on which delicate cascading flute lines floated effortlessly. The agreeably placid opening, however, was soon clouded by swells and surges in the strings that suggested the storm ahead, even if the third section never quite gathered into a full-blown tempest. Although the piece was written a decade before the *Seventh Symphony*, its finest moments contained some of that work's sense of opposing forces locked in a hidden struggle just beneath the surface.

Ligeti's *Lontano*, composed half a century later employed oceanic drift as one of its ingredients, but the comparison with Sibelius's impressionistic evocation only highlighted the extent to which Ligeti had left conventional tone-painting behind; and while the past decades have seen *Lontano* secure its place in the canon of twentieth-century masterpieces, familiarity has done little to diminish the strangeness of its sonic world. It is a work best experienced in a real hall, with a real orchestra, even if the ability to see the musicians doesn't always explain the origins of the individual sounds. Indeed it is the work's unconventional groupings – and its handful of full-orchestra passages that bear little resemblance to what a full orchestra should sound like – that form one of its greatest fascinations. Yet if *Lontano* is often approached as a textural exercise, Mr Harding seemed equally concerned with its underlying structure; others have played the work with greater reverence for its mysteries, but Mr Harding's sense of narrative offered an equally compelling view of an endlessly fascinating piece.

It was Britten who suffered most from his proximity to Ligeti; after the epic splendour of *Lontano*, the *Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes* seemed both lightweight and regressively nostalgic. The performances were genial, with superb playing from the horns throughout, and lots of fluttering filigree from the violins and flutes, but the pieces themselves never seemed anything more than merely illustrative. The third interlude had moments of regal pomp, and the fourth had a boisterous excitement that would not have been out of place in a swashbuckling adventure, but as evocations of the sea they were neither as elemental as the Sibelius nor as dangerously playful as the Debussy that would conclude the evening.

As an exercise in juxtaposition, the programme's second half was arguably the more successful: in the most restless moments of Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, in which undercurrents of agitation seem to be fighting against the work's unsettling stillness, one could almost hear echoes of Debussy's *La Mer*. But once again, Ligeti's score resisted comparison. Its most arresting moments – the quiet full-orchestra introduction, the sudden contrasts in pitch and timbre, and the unsettling rumble of lightly brushed piano strings that bring the piece to a close – sound as disconcerting today as they must have done in 1961. If Mr Harding, again, seemed more preoccupied with structure than texture, his command of the orchestral forces yielded a performance of exacting clarity.

Mr Harding's penchant for clarity carried over to *La Mer*, the final work of the evening, in which Debussy's most luminous passages were rendered not with the gauzy strokes of an

impressionist but the precise lines of a realist. It was a motivated performance that made the most of the work's orchestral vigour, even if it occasionally came across more as a compendium of brilliant moments than a unified journey through the shifting moods of the ocean. Although the flutes and clarinets played with dazzling fluidity, it was, once again, the horns who made the greatest impression, playing with a captivating force that never upset the finely balanced orchestral sound (and, crucially, never overpowered the strings). Mr Harding seemed most at home in the final movement, in which the rhythmic undercurrents were accentuated to produce a bracing climactic section.

The modernist impulse of the post-war decades yielded many promising developments, but an equal number of false starts and dead ends. Just as there were many buildings that followed the trends of modernism in unimaginative ways, there are numerous compositions so doctrinaire in their pursuit of a modernist aesthetic that they stand today primarily as souvenirs of a particular era. But if these are the buildings and pieces that now seem most dated, there are others that achieved their own timelessness: while the vocabulary of the Philharmonie continues to inform the design of concert halls into the present day, Scharoun's design has arguably not yet been surpassed. *Lontano* and *Atmosphères*, works that belong to the same era, are equally inimitable: one is still amazed by Ligeti's ability to envisage these sounds and structures, and to capture them in notated form. It is not difficult to imagine how, when these works are performed some sixty years from now, they will still have the power to inspire a mixture of delight and disbelief.