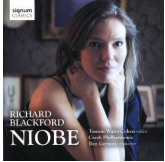


Richard Blackford - Niobe (2018)

Written by bluesever (Bogdan Marszałkowski)
Monday, 19 April 2021 10:48 -

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1 *Niobe The Lover* 6:44 2 *Niobe The Blaspheme* 4:34 3 *Niobe The Pleader* 4:08 4 *Niobe The Mourner* 7:43
Tamsin Waley-Cohen - Violin Czech Philharmonic Orchestra Ben Gernon - Conductor

I'd trust the violinist who wedded works by Roy Harris and John Adams on one the most absorbing concerto discs for many years (12/16) to bring us interesting repertoire, and that is exactly what Tamsin Waley-Cohen does here, even if there are some strings attached.

Richard Blackford's *Niobe*, perhaps best described as a symphonic poem with solo violin, tells of the woman who claimed greater respect than the goddess of motherhood, Leto, by virtue of the fact that she had 14 offspring to Leto's two. Niobe had her seven sons and seven daughters killed as punishment before being turned to stone. The link to women of our own time 'cruelly punished for offences of blasphemy, apostasy and non-conformity' (Blackford) works to a point but Niobe's downfall, even if we wouldn't condone the punishment, was surely caused by a level of hubris that would hardly cause anyone problems today.

Detail, perhaps, but Blackford's score can be similarly disorientating for all its strengths, even if those strengths are wondrous. Each of his four movements is heavily pregnant with narrative tension: a slithering depiction of 'The Lover', a compellingly fraught and strained evocation of 'The Blasphemer', a picture of her heartfelt desperation in 'The Pleader' and a sorrowful final movement, 'The Mourner', in which Blackford's solution to the turning-to-stone – the violin akin to 'an insect struggling in the last seconds of its life', in the composer's words – is a masterstroke.

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His writing is thematically concentrated, notably evocative and clearly heartfelt. It is close to Szymanowski in sound and in its solutions in pitting a solo violin against a lustrous orchestra. A particularly lustrous orchestra in this case, the Czech Philharmonic, against which Waley-Cohen's violin tone is characteristically strong and steely, notably in the double-stopped cadenza over a drone in 'The Mourner'. The piece is only 23 minutes long and is the only work you get, which is only a problem if you want it to be. ---Andrew Mellor, gramophone.co.uk

You will note that this CD, promoted as an EP, offers only 23 minutes of music, and is selling for around the price of a Naxos CD. Many buyers will be put off, thinking it poor value. I would certainly think very carefully before taking a punt on music I had not heard before when so little seemed to be on offer. Yet the concerto is not without interest and charm, and is beautifully performed by two of Britain's finer young artists. I cannot understand the thinking behind releasing the work in this way, and so need to begin my review with a caveat emptor.

With that health warning, there is much here to ponder. The concerto – for that is what Niobe is – is conceived as a single span. It was obviously conceived in collaboration with Tamsin Waley-Cohen as Richard Blackford's helpful notes make clear.

The source is the ancient legend of Niobe, the daughter of tantalus who gave birth to fourteen children. She boasted that she was superior to the goddess Leto, who managed only two. Following something of a hissy fit, Leto sends Apollo to kill Niobe's seven sons, and Artemis to see off the daughters. Niobe's husband kills himself and Niobe is petrified (literally) on Mount Sipylus and, the cascades over the rock are her endless tears.

This tale is used by composer and soloist – who collaborated closely – as an allegory for the continuing abuse and ill-treatment of women, but knowledge of the story really isn't necessary to recognise the beauty and interest of the music. It has many contrasting aspects, though the lasting impression I took away was of its meditative and lyrical aspect. Much is very beautiful and oddly timeless in a traditional and melodic idiom. I enjoyed it, and it will give much pleasure – and it certainly deserves a place on our concert platforms.

Tamsi Waley-Cohen plays magnificently – not a matter of surprise in such an accomplished

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young violinist. Ben Gernon – with whom she frequently collaborates – is a conductor of whom we shall hear much more, and rightly: definitely one to follow. ---Michael Wilkinson, musicweb-international.com

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