

Outstanding Schumann

Michael Scott Rohan welcomes a rare outing for *Manfred*



SCREEN ICON:
a projection of Johann
von Bülow as Manfred



SCHUMANN

Manfred

Johann von Bülow, Stefan Wilkening, Tina Amon Amonsén, Vera Bauer, Dieter Prochnow, Mechthild Bach, Markus Flaig, Manfred Bittner, Ekkehard Abele, Tobias Berndt; Düsseldorf Symphony; Städtischen Musikverein Choir of Düsseldorf; Andrey Boreyko; dir. Johannes Deutsch (Tonhalle Düsseldorf, 2010)
Arthaus Musik 101 575 (NTSC system; PCM stereo; 16:9 picture format) 89 mins
BBC Music Direct £17.99

There's no denying the electrifying effect Byron had on German Romantics, the teenage Schumann among them, though he only set *Manfred* late in life. *Manfred* was

largely Byron's response to Goethe's *Faust*. His archetypal Byronic hero was a Faustian scholar/sorcerer, seeking forbidden knowledge by commanding spirits – and, tormented (like Byron himself) by incestuous love. In death, Manfred defies religious convention to seek his own redemption. Schumann's

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literally melodramatic setting, mingling speech and song, never became popular; only the turbulent overture is regularly performed.

Düsseldorf's 2010 Schumann festival, though, staged *Manfred* with multimedia, to brilliantly magical effect. The excellent orchestra, chorus and soloists are dwarfed by two vast screens,

eye-shaped and global, beneath the Tonhalle's dome. The face of Manfred (Johann von Bülow) appears only in projection, mingling with ceaselessly flowing images ranging from Alpine landscapes to abstract glowing patterns as he summons his spirits. Their songs provide some of the most beautiful music, in the airy, shimmering vein of Schumann's *Paradise and the Peri*. Meanwhile, orchestral and choral passages equal the resonant grandeur of *Scenes from Faust*. The overture is the merest introduction to an outstanding work.

Manfred won't please everyone. Byron translates well into German and there are subtitles, but there's still a lot of speech. Nevertheless, anyone who loves Schumann will find *Manfred* and this exceptionally beautiful staging a revelation.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
PICTURE & SOUND ★★★★★

See an excerpt of this recording at www.classical-music.com