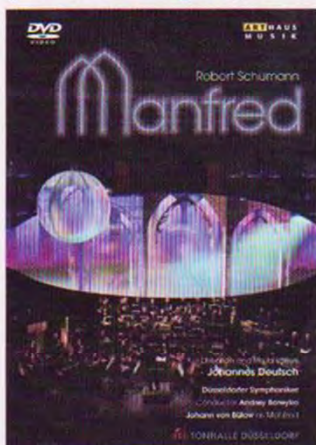


Johannes Deutsch, director of this semi-staged production, calls the rarely seen *Manfred* (1849) “a Gesamtkunstwerk,” but that seems too complimentary for so lopsided a piece. Schumann composed incidental music to accompany Lord Byron’s drama in verse, but the results are just a bit *too* incidental. The music is subservient to the text, as the composer acknowledged, and, except for the moody but not very dramatic fifteen-minute overture, it is too fragmented to sustain interest. Some passages run concurrently with the verse, others economically strike a tone for a scene or speech before fading away. While there are



echoes among the pieces, little melodic development occurs. A few scenes elicit no more music than a single chord, a costly exclamation point.

Interest shifts inevitably to the text, performed energetically by established German actors in this Robert Schumann bicentennial offering that uses the abridged translation he worked with. Byron’s 1817 drama, once obligatory for European Romantics, is mostly a monologue that traces a tortured hero’s quest for “oblivion, self-oblivion” as he flees to the Swiss Alps to commune with spirits and revisit a dark past that remains mostly vague. He attempts suicide and finally dies, defying offers of religious comfort.

Schumann discreetly enhances the atmosphere in the first scene’s song of the spirits by using contrasting voice types for their various realms (mountain, water, earth, sun), while skimming on instrumental flavor or other stylistic differentiation. In later episodes, a bass vocal quartet and full chorus provide intimations of menace but ignore possible color cues such as “When the moon is on the wave,/

And the glow-worm in the grass” or “falling stars are shooting.” Evocative English-horn solos for “the natural music of the mountain reed” in the Alpine meeting with a hunter finally enliven the modest orchestral palette, which sometimes suggests Mendelssohn’s influence.

Deutsch’s lively visual production uses enlarged projections, mostly close-ups of actor Johann von Bülow in the nonstop title role, sometimes overlaid with Alpine panoramas, painted decors or just swaths of color. The musical performers often are visible in the lower half of the screen, an effect that is more congenial than expected. The subtitles quote from Byron’s original verse, sometimes slightly modernized (“you” for the poet’s “thou”).

Von Bülow, with his piercing gaze and bag of vocal tics, epitomizes the eccentric, accursed Romantic hero chafing at mortal limits. The vocal soloists have strong timbres that provide some much-needed interest in the musical selections. Andrey Boreyko conducts with more steadiness than dynamism, perhaps understandably, given the necessary focus on complex intercutting among actors, soloists, chorus and orchestra. While it is interesting to witness this meeting of two Romantic creative spirits, the package remains more a historical curiosity than a burst of synergy.

DAVID J. BAKER

aus:

OPERA NEWS, New York/USA

SCHUMANN: *Manfred*

□ *Bach, Popien; Mammel, Flaig; Chor des Städtischen Musikvereins zu Düsseldorf; Düsseldorfer Symphoniker; Boreyko. Von Bülow, Wilkening, Amons, Bauer, Prochnow, actors. Production: J. Deutsch. Arthaus Musik 101 575, 89 mins., subtitled*