

Review: American University of Beirut Hosts a Voguish Swiss Composer

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Fortunat Frölich

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Among those of this century, Fortunat Frölich may be one of the most empowering composers for a new generation. With a wide range of styles, his music strongly reflects his near obsession with the intercultural and, aware that I would be visiting the Lebanese capital, I was persuaded by James Oestreich to drop in on the *choR inteRkultuR*'s joint concert with the AUB Chorus, under Thomas Kim of Messiah fame (*cf.* Review: Nov 6, 2016).

Frölich's composition *aanilhoub* or 'about love' premiered at the *Festival Mawazine* 'rhythms of the world' in 2006, in Rabat, where he is a guest Professor at the National Conservatory of Morocco. It consists of individual texts in loosely, Arabic, German, English, French and a mix of percussive murmurs, rumbles, thumps and deep breathing; each on the theme of love in one aspect or another, for soprano, alto and bass soloists and the usual SATB choir. Accompaniment is an oud, fiddle, percussion and Arabic chant, in what I took to be Moroccan, since the Lebanese choristers seemed to occasionally stumble when called upon to stand in for the Arab soloist, Rima Khcheich, pretty much on top the rest of the time, with her seemingly unnecessary mike and speakers that only upset the balance between her, the band, and the choir. We're weren't in Carnegie Hall, after all.

As with two of the others, the opening gist is taken from Khalil Gibran, he of *The Prophet* fame, and traditional Arabic lyrics, both invoking what love will do to you if you let it, which of course the Lebanese do with only the slightest provocation. The music certainly lives up to the spirit and attack of the subject matter and when this switches from *caressing* to *quivering*, so too do the sopranos in a quite splendid phrase, followed by a *tutti glissando* to signal in the basses' march to the rescue! It's great stuff!

It must be said that *Les Printemps* comes as something of a relief after a few numbers that at times evoke Arnold Schoenberg's declaration that "*Neue Musik ist bei der ersten Bekanntschaft niemals schön*", but then as Oestreich keeps telling me, the closest I've ever got to appreciating 'modern' music was watching Gershwin giving Duke Ellington piano lessons, though it might have been the other way around. But soloists Pascal Ganz and the exceptional Martin Roth do themselves proud in this excerpt from Bohemian poet Rainer Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, as do the choir, with some impressive swelling of tonal volume, swoops and climatic *fortissimo*. It is to be remembered that the last of these is not to be confused with the first, tonal volume being a subjective attribute of the sound, distinct from loudness, pitch and density and discovered in 1934 when S.S. Stevens at Harvard showed that tones of different frequency could be made to sound equal in volume by adjusting their relative intensities. Isn't that interesting? Well, Herr Frölich obviously thinks so because he makes full use of the technique, switching from German to French just to hammer home the point. What must have been a dozen or so bars of chromatic descent followed by *sostenuto* üüü's was too much for one mature bass in the back row, who ended up panting on an alto's shoulder. She didn't seem to mind.

Dawoud Hosni's arrows of love hit just about everyone in the audience with a gorgeous mix of rolling melody from the Arabic soloist and exquisitely controlled counterpoint from the choir. The traditional *Ya Ghazali* song that followed has been played around with by just about every Arabic composer and singer but this Swiss version has most of them beat. Whether the Lebanese choir should have been given the chant in place of Rima Khcheich remains a moot point, and while they sang with gusto, they must have had qualms about leaving the sublime swing and jazz accompaniment in their native tongue to the Swiss. It should not be left to composers to make such decisions. I thought *mon amour m'exauce* to be melodiously expressed, until my neighbor kindly informed me that it did *not* mean 'my loved one exhausts me'. From *The Prophet*, the sheer excitement of *Love*, the theme of the evening after all, is flung our way in a thrilling use of all sections of the choir, with fine soprano, Monà Hallab and equally dulcet alto, Corina Cavegn embellishing the coda. There is excellent use of diaphragm pushes, tonal volume (again!) chromatic clashes, crescendos to naughty words, sudden soft and lyrical mysticism, well, you name it and it's in there! I'm beginning to catch on to this modern mania – it's really rather good.

The finale was taken at a spanking pace, involving all four soloists and the choir in their proper places, using the composer's finest techniques in what can only be described as a showdown of musical counterparts, whatever that may mean. It was foot tapping fun and musically mature and the audience and I loved it! Frölich studied at the conservatories of Zurich, Naples, and the Academy of Music in Leipzig and cooperates as composer and conductor with *inter alia* the Zurich Chamber Orchestra, the Symphony Orchestra of Basel and the North of England Chamber Orchestra. Dr Thomas Kim is Head of Music at AUB and was on the faculty at Rowan and assistant conductor at Harvard.