

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

CONDUCTOR

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MUSIC REVIEW

BSO brings full drama to 'Oedipus'

By Richard Dyer, Globe Staff | May 5, 2006

The Boston Symphony Orchestra is ending its 125th season this weekend with Christoph von Dohnanyi leading a generally extraordinary performance of a totally extraordinary work, Stravinsky's genre-bending opera-oratorio "Oedipus Rex."

This piece stands alone, towering -- it is full of influences but almost without precedents; it has often been imitated, but seldom successfully, unless you happen to admire the operas of Carl Orff.

The genius of "Oedipus" is its combination of ritual and drama. Like a bas-relief of a stampede, it presents the paradox of marmoreal stasis that depicts an inexorable and accelerating forward motion. The spoken narration by Jean Cocteau, delivered in the language of the audience, tells the ancient story of how Oedipus the King comes belatedly to realize that he has murdered his father and married his mother.

The Latin text of the oratorio itself presents some key encounters as dramatic action, but the words are often set not for their meaning but for their chameleon rhythms. Stravinsky uses the men's chorus and the soloists almost as additional percussion section. Much of the work distances emotion, but then suddenly presents it with startling immediacy, as when Oedipus sings "All is made light" on the simplest descending tonal arpeggio.

Dohnanyi led a performance like dry ice: it was so cold it burned. The clarity and intensity of his vision came through consistently despite occasional moments of approximate execution.

The men of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus sang with excellent intonation and driving rhythm. And the male soloists were superb. There was a thunderous trio of basses led by the eminent Jamaican artist Sir Willard White as Creon, with Franz-Josef Selig as Tiresias, and the awe-inspiring Clayton Brainerd as the Messenger. Tenor Peter Bronder also poured it on as the Shepherd.

Australian tenor Stuart Skelton brought to the title role the vocal resources of a Wagnerian hero and the verbal imagination of a Lieder recitalist. His frock coat made him look more like a doctor in a western than a king, but the slow dawning of the truth across his face was painful to watch. The translation of the spoken text sounded more British than American (Oedipus "breaks enigma"), but actor Philip Bosco delivered it with understated authority and sympathy. Mezzo Anna Larsson in the pivotal role of Oedipus's mother Jocasta was disappointing. Her tall, striking presence was not matched by her unevenly projected voice and a singular placidity of temperament.

The concert opened with Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony, conducted with insight and precision by Dohnanyi; this was a leaner, tauter performance than the one the orchestra delivered for James Levine a few years ago. At one point the decision about whether to take a repeat or not was not unanimous, although if memory serves, that happened at one of Levine's performances too.

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Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019
(212)757-0782 - Fax (212)541-5179 - West Coast (858)794-0182
E-mail: NYColbert@ColbertArtists.com