



BCMG/Wendeberg review – musical Marxists short on revolutionary zeal

CBSO Centre, Birmingham Two notable examples aside, these new compositions written to celebrate Marx in his bi-centennial year, are underwhelming

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Wed 5 Sep 2018 16.53 BST

In Britain, the country in which he spent more than half his life, events to mark the bicentenary of Karl Marx's birth have been low key. Trier, the Rhineland city in which he was born, has made much more of the anniversary, even including a composing competition, *Wilde Lieder Marx Music*, among the special events. Birmingham Contemporary Music Group were partners in the project, and last weekend in Trier the ensemble premiered the winning scores, alongside two commissioned for the occasion, bringing some of them back to the CBSO Centre this week for a concert conducted by Michael Wendeberg.

The musical responses to the philosopher's life and works were mixed, and distinctly short on revolutionary zeal. Two of the composers deconstructed his texts – Alistair Zaldua's *Manifesto* took passages from the *Communist Manifesto*, isolating some phrases and giving them a very different spin, while in *Letter to H Marx*, Sergej Newski used extracts from Karl's 1837 letter to his father, presenting each fragment in a different musical context.

But both were desperately insubstantial, the words spoken or declaimed rather than sung - by the underused baritone Marcus Farnsworth - and supported by ensemble writing that did little to enhance them. One of the instrumental pieces, Andrea Portera's Wild Rituals, was equally disappointing and incoherent, but the other two were at least musically worthwhile, even if they seemed only tangentially associated with Marx. Frédéric Pattar's Deflation - Eine Kleine Marxmusik strikingly exploited the sprinkling of pitches the piano presents at the start of the work, while Cecilia Arditto's The Dearest Dream was the most effective of all, exploring the harmonic spectrum of a single pitch that was coloured and punctuated by the "found" sounds of everyday objects - electric fans, a sweeping broom. A straightforward idea, stylishly executed.

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