

Alice Coote, *mezzo soprano*  
BBC Symphony Chorus  
BBC Symphony Orchestra  
Jiří Bělohlávek, *conductor*

Concert Archive 1639  
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The heart of this Prom, though, wasn't the cheerful pieces but Brahms's devastating *Rhapsody for Contralto*, the *Alto Rhapsody*. This was a wonderful performance. Few singers can produce the intensity Alice Coote can bring, without sacrificing dignity and compassion.

Goethe's poem depicts an outcast who sets off away into the wilderness. From a brooding orchestral introduction, Coote's voice projects into the vastness of the Royal Albert Hall as if it were a recital room. It's significant, for the poem pits an individual against overwhelming forces. *Die Ode verschlingt ihn* goes the text (the desert engulfs him). Coote breathed into the "o" in *Ode* so it rang resonantly, yet hinting subtly of hollowness. Then she extended "verschlingt", stretching it to evoke distance and then oblivion.

There's something obsessive about this poem. The disappointed man "furtively feeds on his own worth in unfulfilling self-love" (*zehrt er heimlich auf seinen eignen Wert in ung'nügender Selbstsucht*) Coote brought out the repeated sounds "seinen" and "eigenen". The protagonist is going round in circles, grinding himself down. Perhaps that's why the poem appealed to Brahms? Ostensibly he was upset that he'd been jilted by Clara Schumann's daughter but there's no evidence that he had a real relationship with her, or indeed with any woman, Clara included. Even more so than the *German Requiem* this is Brahms's *Winterreise*, a foretaste of the *Vier ernste Gesänge*.

Perhaps that's why the resolution in this piece comes from the way Brahms integrates the soloist, chorus and orchestra. A characteristic Brahmsian flute melody appears, at first tentatively, then grows in power, joined in the final strophe with the choir of men's voices: no longer is the mezzo really alone, for the *Vater der Liebe* (father of love, possibly God) has shown compassion, revealing the thousand springs that can help the thirsty in the desert. "*die tausend Quellen neben dem Durstenden in der Wüste*." Coote rounds the vowel sounds in *Wüste* so the word seems to grow with fulfilment.

It's been 40 years since the *Alto Rhapsody* has been heard at the Proms. Chances are that few will be able to top Alice Coote's performance tonight. Coote came to prominence when she won the Kathleen Ferrier Prize a few years ago. Ferrier's version is legendary, but Coote's delivery is firmer and stronger.

Bron: <http://classical-iconoclast.blogspot.com/2009/07/first-night-of-proms-2009-alice-coote.html>