

# BBCSO/Denève – review

Barbican Hall, London

☆☆☆☆☆



**Erica Jeal**

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Most music inspired by childhood isn't really for children at all. Poulenc's ballet Les Animaux Modèles was premiered in wartime Paris; while on one hand it represents a lush musical retelling of La Fontaine's fables, on the other it is a covert up-yours to the occupying forces, offering a nostalgic idealisation of a sunlit French landscape – one with no Germans in. The final movement is what Poulenc reserves his weightiest, most emotionally loaded music for. Its title? Lunch.

The 1943 suite from the ballet formed the first half of an evening of French musical storytelling, and, thanks to the BBCSO's Plus Family scheme of cheap tickets and pre-concert talks, there were plenty of children to hear it. The La Fontaine stories came alive thanks to Stephen Mangan's wry readings of Craig Hill's new translation between movements. As for the music, under Stéphane Denève's nimble baton each tale was as colourful and comforting as an illustration from a long-lost childhood book.

The junior antihero of Ravel's short opera L'Enfant et les Sortilèges gets his comeuppance when the household objects he has broken come alive, and the small animals tormented by him gain voices. Here the BBCSO teamed up with student singers from the Royal Academy of Music. Again, under Denève the orchestral playing was pacy and vivid, and the choral singing was vibrant.

But Jean-Baptiste Barrière's videos, on a screen above the orchestra, were a very mixed blessing. Each solo singer's face was filmed live, then blurrily superimposed in slow-motion on to the animated image of his or her character. To some extent it clarified the action – and, in concert, an opera involving a talking teapot needs explaining. But the overall effect was frenetic and messy – and it diverted our attention from the lively communication of the best of the singers, including Rozanna Madylus as the Child, Fiona Mackay as his Mother and a bereaved Dragonfly, and Ross Scanlon as that outraged Teapot.

• *Broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 14 July.*

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