



THE PROMS LISTENING SERVICE

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom

ANDERS HILLBORG

Sirens

Sounds, music and songs that seduce vulnerable travellers, steering them to their doom, the mythic story that Anders Hillborg dares to realise in his music: the roots of the myth of the Sirens have so many contemporary parallels. The siren song of scandalous music – especially sensually, sexually alluring music – has been a constant in the way that societies have thought of music's dangerous powers ever since the Ancient Greeks. It's there in Plato's theories about which musical modes and scales should be used to morally uplift a population, and which should be banned completely because of their inherent licentiousness. The Dutch composer **Louis Andriessen** has written a whole piece, *De staat*, that sets those texts: using Plato's forbidden modes, he wishes that Plato had been right, and that music itself really could change the world in the way his philosophy describes. Ironically, it's the censors who have done as much as anyone to demonstrate music's socially eruptive powers over the centuries: **Wagner's** opera *Tristan and Isolde* was considered so morally reprehensible in the late 19th century that young ladies were forbidden from seeing it and experiencing its death-defying sounds of ecstatic-erotic bliss. The same moral panic has surrounded music throughout the 20th century, for many reasons: there's the long list of songs once banned by the BBC, from The Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK' to Tom Robinson's 'Glad to Be Gay'. Billie Holiday's recording of 'Strange Fruit' was banned by South African apartheid radio, and in the 1980s and 1990s there was tabloid and government outrage over the supposedly morally deleterious effects of heavy metal on

the innocent minds and hearts of the young. In the courts, metal won, as it should have done. We need to listen to music's liberating siren songs, such as Anders Hillborg's, more than ever!

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

Scheherazade

An exotic sonic fantasy; an indulgence of orchestral colour and whimsy. What's wrong with that? Nothing, of course; but just go a wee bit beneath the surface and it's possible to hear Rimsky's orchestral masterpiece as a high-water mark of European orientalism: that view of any culture apart from the Russian or European mainstream as 'other', as something to be turned into a sign of the exotic, the distant, the fantastical, as if the peoples of the Middle East, of the Far East, of Africa, of South America, of the whole of the rest of the world were nothing more than ciphers for the Western imagination to play with, as violently and prejudicially as it pleases. What's music got to do with it? A lot: that exotic othering is there in the fake 'oriental' curlicues of Rimsky's melodic and harmonic language in *Scheherazade*; it's there in the racially caricatured Japanoiserie of **Puccini's** *Madam Butterfly*, and you can hear it in earlier music too, in the pseudo-Turkish music of **Mozart, Beethoven** and **Haydn**. Today we live in more enlightened times. Right? Well – no, far from it. We're still racially caricaturing in our music in the West, especially in film and TV soundtracks, in which any and all Arabic characters – especially terrorists – have to be accompanied by some lazy sonic signifier of Middle Eastern otherness like a fake call to prayer, or a slidy chromatic line in the strings, as opposed to the fast-paced, beat-driven 'normal' music of the Western hero or

heroine. The same is often true when Chinese or Japanese characters are introduced, with brainless pastiches of 'Eastern' musics. And this kind of musical-cultural profiling is even there in nature soundtracks, in which Japanese salamanders have fake shakuhachis as their music, and Chinese crustaceans are given a Disneyfied Chinese-ness that would have embarrassed even Disney. More evidence of how dangerous music can be ...



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