



The sarod player Debasmita Bhattacharya joined Manu Delago and the Aurora orchestra

FIRST NIGHT | CLASSICAL

Aurora/Manu Delago review — an epic mash-up with ear-popping sounds

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Richard Morrison

Thursday October 12 2023, 12.30pm, The Times

★★★★☆

When I first came across Manu Delago, at the Edinburgh Fringe 15 years ago, he was “merely” the world’s most virtuosic exponent of the hang — steel pans struck with the bare hands. These days the Austrian is a composer, film-maker, creative accomplice to the hippest musicians on the planet and still the world’s most virtuosic hang player.

All that was evident in this delightful entertainment, concocted with Aurora, an orchestra that’s always up for a challenge. The challenge for the players here, at least in the second half, must have been keeping their eyes on the score and their playing perfectly co-ordinated with what was happening on the big screen, as violent lighting changes flashed around them and Delago’s new orchestration of his 2021 album *Environ Me* unfolded in nine epic segments.

Epic, that is, in their technological intricacy and multimedia ambition rather than their length or harmonic complexity. On the screen Delago (or, often, several Delagos, all wearing black woolly hats) jogged around London parks in all seasons, lit a campfire in the Alps, clung fearlessly to pylons and — in one surreal scene — led a band of 20 double-bass players perched on tree stumps in a forest.

I think we were meant to sense some deep ecological subtext. Frankly, though, the main message conveyed by *Environ Us* (as this new version is called) was Delago’s sheer exuberance at precisely co-ordinating the “found” sounds — from the plop of pebbles thrown into water to the screech of a car-crushing yard and the rip of Velcro — with live orchestral music, sometimes sweetly lullaby-like, elsewhere pounding like a rave in a metal factory.

Delago’s music in the concert’s first half was calmer, at least until the ear-popping upward pitch glissando, like a spaceship taking off, that ended his *Newton’s Rainbow*. The pleasure here, however, was in hearing a succession of disparate pieces merged seamlessly. They included Anna Thorvaldsdottir’s drone-based and folk-inflected string-orchestra work *Illumine*, the contrapuntal intricacy of the In Nomine in seven parts by Henry Purcell, and a raga (ingeniously embellished by the string players) from a fine young sarod player, Debasmita Bhattacharya.