

By A.Hall

Prom 48, Royal Albert Hall, London

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Tête à Tête: The Opera Festival, London

The starter turned out to be the most substantial, though even this was a work-in-progress. Jean-Philippe Calvin's *La Cantatrice Chauve* is a setting of Ionesco's absurdist classic play, which has been running in Paris since 1957. It's partly a parody of bourgeois normality. Two married couples, the Smiths and the Martins, communicate (or not) in phrases taken from English phrasebooks. The banality of their discourse contrasts with their alternately prim and hyper behaviour.

Calvin's score – valiantly accompanied by the composer on percussion and Richard Black on piano – sounds promising, attaining a manic modernist equivalent to a hell-for-leather Rossini ensemble. It might well benefit from the full orchestration that is presumably forthcoming. One or two scenes were left out here. Bill Bankes-Jones, who directed the piece, fleshed out the gaps with a spoken narration. The audience was offered two alternative endings, one with live electronics, provided by Stefan Tiedje, the other without. They chose, quite rightly, the electronic one, which added just that extra touch of surrealism to a show that was fast-paced and entertainingly wacky. Jeremy Huw Williams and Alison Bell sang Mr and Mrs Smith, Daniel Norman and Rachel Nichols took on Mr and Mrs Martin. All provided good value.