

MUSIK HEUTE

Martin Grubinger and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Bring Groove to Hanover

Hanover (MH) – He stood all alone with his pipe drum and effortlessly filled Germany's largest concert hall – not just with sounds, but especially so with his expressive stage presence. Martin Gruber, the multi-percussionist from Austria, veritably roused the audience in Hanover's Kuppelsaal off their seats on Friday night.

On his journey of sound from Africa to 1920s Berlin and Japan, the six-strong ensemble 'Grubinger & Friends' opened up not just a completely new world of sound to the audience, but also presented a way of making music that is unconventional in Western cultural circles.

The percussionists confronted the physical challenge dynamically, almost ecstatically, and with great visible enjoyment and full physical commitment, without relinquishing any virtuosity. Prior to the final encore, an energetic Martin Grubinger jokingly commented, 'Let's see what the muscles have left in the tank.' Thanks to the constant and subtle communication, the ensemble fused into a powerful complex consisting of brilliant high-performance musicians.

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the Austrian Manfred Honeck, presented Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony with a very different attitude. Unlike Martin Grubinger, the instrumental ensemble squandered its opportunities to develop and unfold right at the start of the concert with excessive dynamic contrasts, driving listeners from climax to climax.

Even though the finale of the first movement caused a brief moment of goose bumps, the Pittsburgh musicians were not able to follow up on this self-imposed intensity. And with that Manfred Honeck succumbed to a temptation he himself had previously cautioned about: the conductor clearly was unable to resist the 'temptation of excess' – a lack of control over the dynamics.

On the other hand, the orchestra always generated an emotional and fragile atmosphere whenever the strings stepped into the background and the wind instruments came to the fore: it was only the hesitant applause that was able to interrupt this intimate moment of pause. The audience judged that the long journey had been worthwhile, responding to the performance with shouts of 'bravo' and stomping feet.

There is more that connects Honeck and Grubinger than nationality – the two men have known each other for 25 years – and that became clear in Bruno Hartl's 'Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra'. 'It'll be groovy,' Grubinger promised. And it was. As an imposing backdrop of sound, the orchestra created space for Grubinger's intense, focused performance. With his alternation between concentrated tension and release, Grubinger did not just captivate the audience – he also managed to tease the orchestra out of its initial hesitation.