

Before the final bite

Daniil Trifonov and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra at the Musikfestspiele

The term 'Big Five' dates back to the 1960s, and refers to the five big US orchestras in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York and Philadelphia. Naturally, this was associated with great ideals about the sound and famous orchestral 'educators'.

Today we know that many cities in the United States possess outstanding orchestras. Since 2008 the Austrian conductor Manfred Honeck has run the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, which had a guest performance at the Dresden Music Festival during its European tour – the one little fly in the ointment on Monday night was the acoustically tricky venue in the Albertinum. The Americans came with a Classical and Romantic repertoire. The audience was particularly keen to see that night's soloist: the Russian Daniil Trifonov, who comes with high honours from competitions and enjoys success worldwide, is considered the new star in the piano world.

If there was anything that could have been faulted, then it was the compactness of the First Piano Concerto in E flat major by Franz Liszt, which meant that the Trifonov experience lasted no more than a good twenty minutes. But what a twenty minutes! Trifonov threw himself into the work with a tension that can only be called animalistic. From the moment he started playing it was clear that he would dominate the concert to the same extent a cat dominates a mouse it knows it has surely caught, before it makes its final bite: Trifonov threw himself into an ecstatic performance that is inherent in the work, yet pianists rarely possess the ability or the courage to tickle this force out of the Liszt concerto. Daniil Trifonov managed much more than this because he held the tension right to the last chord, while dotting childlike, playful accents into the piece, as if he were not sitting on stage but romping around in a carefree manner on a musical playground. His performance was met with raging applause and the people of Dresden will surely very much look forward to his residency at the Dresden Staatskapelle this upcoming season. Manfred Honeck did a sterling job of accompanying Trifonov with the Pittsburgh musicians during the Liszt performance; the orchestra did not have the courage to even dare come near to upstaging the soloist, but instead assured him a solid foundation.

Before this piece the American musicians opened the concert with Joseph Haydn's 93rd Symphony in D major, a repertoire that would not necessarily be considered familiar for an American orchestra. The biggest problem in the Albertinum was performing the symphony in a light and breezy manner, but Manfred Honeck deployed Viennese upbeats and a lot of dynamic transparency and thus had no real trouble capturing the music's characters. This was particularly successful because the joy of making music in the orchestra is palpable, and this naturally benefitted Haydn.

The final work was the trump card for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra: the 4th Symphony in F minor by Tchaikovsky is always a stellar piece of music, but it also reveals an orchestra's special qualities. What the Americans displayed here was exceptionally powerful: in performance culture, in attentiveness for Honeck's motivating conducting style and pithy attacks by the wind instruments during the tutti; the interpretation was rousing and intense in all four movements. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra bid its farewell to Dresden

with a movement from the ballet Sleeping Beauty by Tchaikovsky and the Galop from Masquerade by Aram Khachaturian. A chamber ensemble made up of some of the orchestra's musicians performed at the Theresienstadt memorial site on Sunday, bringing back to life forgotten works by 'degenerate' composers – it is good to see that the musicians pursue such important initiatives alongside the big tour concerts.

Caption: Daniil Trifonov was an experience at the piano, even though his part only lasted around 20 minutes.