Analytical Beauty
Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra Perform with Daniil Trifonov in Berlin

By Sascha Krieger

His name frequently gets put out there whenever an important principal conductor slot needs to be filled: Manfred Honeck, born in Vorarlberg, and a former viola player with the Vienna Philharmonic, has managed the leap into the world's premiere league for conductors – even though, whenever the discussion focuses on the best orchestras in the United States, the most prominent orchestra he has led to date, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, tends to get cited only after the traditional 'Big Five' and the major west coast orchestras of Los Angeles and San Francisco. However, Honeck's predecessors included such high-calibre conductors as Lorin Maazel and Mariss Jansons. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, which even in its own state is still somewhat overshadowed by the even more acclaimed Philadelphia Orchestra, is not a musical lightweight. That much is demonstrated in its once again impressive guest performance in Berlin, which opens with Ludwig van Beethoven's Coriolanus Overture. By the way, the concert features a guest from Berlin who is an old acquaintance: Noah-Bendix-Balgley was the leader of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra until 2014, after which he switched to the Berlin Philharmonic. Now he once again takes the leadership position in his old orchestra.

[Caption: Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (Photo: Michael Sahaida)]

There is tension right from the first bar. Honeck trims the notes, streamlines the sound, creates sharp edges – everything here is condensation, concentration. He quickly establishes the two worlds of the piece: here, the explosive hardness of betrayal, violence and death, and there the velvety soft, infinitely clear, wide strings of hope, filled with almost Karajan-like beauty; here the extreme condensation, there the expanse of the flowing vocals. It would be almost impossible to perform the piece with greater analytical focus, clearer in detail and at the same time with a clear eye for the beauty of the orchestral sound. However, the fact that the Philharmonie in Berlin was completely sold out – definitely unusual for guest concerts – had less to do with the conductor and the orchestra than with Daniil Trifonov. Fans of the 25-year-old Russian include piano legends like Martha Argerich and Alfred Brendel. Many experts consider him the greatest pianist in decades.

He came with Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, a real virtuoso piece, but one that, in its complexity and fragility, requires more than just brilliance. Trifonov's expressive spectrum indeed proves to be exceptional; his touch is sometimes hard and aggressive, in the next moment the arpeggios pearl brightly; then his instrument sings in contemplation, at times almost lost in the most tender lyricism. He effortlessly alters his expression from one note to the next. His sound is deeply romantic, and yet does not ooze with pathos. If there is a

weakness, then it is that he, like many a virtuoso, has a slight tendency to overemphasize. In Berlin he does this by at times placing the individual notes next to each other as monoliths and in doing so forgetting their connection. On the other hand he is quite willing to be immersed by the orchestra, which happens at times in the opening movement. His sound towards the end of the movement, one lost in reverie, somewhere between worlds, is incredible. The music almost disappears into a dream world we want to follow it to. Immediately afterwards he puts on a lot of pressure, rushing forth towards new shores.

His spectrum in the second movement is huge: from the gentlest pearls to harsh hardness and dark rooting. His performance is virtuoso and he is aware of his abilities. He does not rush. He sharply decelerates in the cadence, placing breaks in the would-be idyllic late-romantic world of sound. In the final movement he once again chases through all the expressive modes, to the brink of arbitrariness, which he always avoids, however. A colourful ending, which he leads to a lively, emotional and definitely ambivalent triumph. About the orchestra in general: it is a congenial partner to Trifonov, setting the tone right at the start with its dark, very Russian sound of the strings, which penetrate the whole piece. Honeck primes and accentuates Trifonov's performance with a compact, dense sound, but regularly moves into the role of the driver, the creator, who, in the finale in particular, becomes a real partner in dialogue. The orchestra, as Trifonov had done previously, repeatedly slows down, going into search mode, creating mysterious pianissimos that immediately lead to compacted discharges. Rachmaninoff's world of sound proves to be fissured; it stands at a threshold, at times it threatens to rip it apart. It is restless, the individual parts never really want to come together, a residue is left. This is ultimately an almost radical reading of the work that the conductor and soloist share. This does not diminish the raging applause, the likes of which are rarely heard in Berlin.

Then the orchestra and the conductor are alone again, throwing themselves into one of the most popular symphonic works, Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 6, the Pathétique. Manfred Honeck expels all the 'pathos' from it. The orchestral sound is clear, streamlined and highly concentrated. The dynamic complexity of the opening movement is finely developed by the orchestra, without resorting to shock effects – the switch from the six-fold pianissimo to the fortissimo for example is striking but not overwhelming. The orchestra's performance has momentum, the internal tension is always palpable; the performance consists of retraction and thinning of the sound and extreme, powerful condensation, of passing and becoming. The gaze is analytical, the delivery highly musical. Once again the strings are enchanting; the audience can hear that the man at the helm was once one of the famous strings of the Vienna Philharmonic. That was also the case in the second movement, a movement dedicated to melodiousness. The dense strings soon open up the sound, the clear wind instruments let in light, the music starts to breathe, without the analytical severity that keeps an eye on every thematic and dynamic detail ever letting up. In the third movement Honeck permits an unusual amount of transparency. It becomes darker and more acute, the mood is agitated, the brass instruments are more affirmative. The dominant marching rhythm has a lot of draw, but also a real hard edges. The final jubilation is an aggressive one, one that embodies violence.

The final adagio is no emotively weepy farewell; instead, it is a quick goodbye. The song is clear, simple and free from illusions. Even the strings become more serious now, turning darker again, wallowing one final time in the knowledge of their transience, while everything fades around them, the landscape of sound becoming bleaker. The end comes quickly, it is no long decay, but more of a sober dying down. The head has taken over, the heart follows. Tchaikovsky romantics might not like Honeck's interpretation; however, those who like listening closely will find it has quite a lot to offer. Clarity and truth can be tough without having to impair the beauty of pure music. Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra can do both, making them no bad role model for the piano genius Trifonov, who has to watch out he does not get bogged down in his own virtuosity. He should visit Pittsburgh more often.

Stagescreen
24. Mai 2016