

A successful joke

Russian symphonic music from Pittsburgh and world music for percussion at Pro Musica in the Kuppelsaal

Quite a few things were different at this Pro Musica concert. The fact, for example, that the popular symphony was played before the break with contemporary music afterwards. Normally event organizers worry that this could trigger the subscribers' flight reflex. But in this case a good proportion of the visitors had come especially for these new sounds – filling Hanover's Kuppelsaal significantly more than would be expected with an orchestra of the standing of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, had it not brought the soloist Martin Grubinger along.

It became clear that the fans of the percussionist Martin Grubinger were not all familiar with the customary rituals of a symphony concert when there was more (first movement) or less clapping after every movement of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. However, the conductor Manfred Honeck had led the opening movement of the symphony to produce this emotion. And releasing this emotion comes in the form of loud enthusiasm expressed by the audience. So, before the break this was a regular symphonic concert. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra did its image justice, namely of taking a mid-table position in the premiere league of the US symphonic orchestras. The wind instruments need a bit more bravura and the strings more of a warm polish to allow the orchestra to keep up with its counterparts from Chicago, Boston and New York. However, the Pittsburgh musicians can definitely perform with gusto. The strings whirl their way through the tutti passages. It does not quite work in the figurative sense, but the pizzicato rally of the scherzo was respectably mastered. Principal conductor Manfred Honeck is well practiced, somewhat rushed in the finale, but effective.

Bruno Hartl's concerto 'Malum exemplum' demonstrates how confident of the reaction and how self-confidently these symphonic musicians play. Its title is a successful joke of course, because the piece of music the former solo-timpanist of the Vienna Philharmonic, and now a composer, Bruno Hartl has given his young colleague Martin Grubinger is anything but a 'bad example'. It illustrates the breadth of percussion music, from the contemplative to the explosion, but the clever instrumentation also leaves room for the orchestra.

Grubinger mainly plays the marimba, but there are more instruments awaiting their turn. It is cleverly constructed, atmospheric and rousing. Martin Grubinger has to play an effective cadenza after the 'Feroce', which is meant to have and does have a raw, ferocious feel, and this unfortunately robs his fans of the opportunity to clap after this movement too. But there is enough opportunity for cheering. Loud applause from the Grubinger community, but loyal Pro Musica fans also get into the spirit and build up to even more excitement, after the symphony orchestra has cleared the stage and Martin Grubinger asks his friends (including his father!) to join him. Matthias Schmitt's 'Ghanaia' has a rhythm that takes the audience from the beach to the jungle. Kurt Engel's pointed ragtime 'Look Out Little Ruth', for which Grubinger switches to the xylophone and hands the marimba over to two male and one female colleague, is a clever counterweight. The 'Marimba Spiritual' by Minoru Miki takes us to the Far East, where the soloists, encouraged by three percussionists, moves from a meditative start to a musical trance. Even more excitement – and a final solo encore: the international star as a little drummer boy. More of this! Including such, shall we say, unconventional encounters.

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