

Dresden: high-quality concerts with Wellber and Honeck

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Manfred Honeck
(c) Jason Cohn

Pizzicato staffer Alain Steffen attended concerts at the Dresden Musikfestspiele. This is his report.

As is the case every year, the Dresden Music Festival once again delivered a diverse, interesting and top-class programme in different venues. Artistic director Jan Vogler manages time and again to go down new avenues in developing the programme, using a lot of imagination and courage, thereby making the festival a real place of encounter and cultural exchange.

Speaking about this year's motto, 'Time', Jan Vogler said: "The relationship between time and music has greatly interested me. Great music is always either in harmony with or in stark contrast to the time in which it is composed. It does not lose this imprinting over the centuries, it is its elixir. Music tells the story of its time in a lively and atmospheric manner; music is often the emotional memory of its creative period. At the same time the performance of pieces of music influences our sense of time. It rushes and propels us forward, it stands still, it flows in harmony with our organism or it tortures us in its poignancy. A good concert always permits us to engage in a magical mental discourse between the past and the future."

We attended two good – not to say outstanding – concerts in Dresden on 21 and 23 May. We were particularly excited to see the conductor Omer Meir Wellber, a high flyer who, since assisting Daniel Barenboim, has had a bravura career and is now invited to all the big orchestras and opera houses. In Dresden Wellber conducted a memorable performance of Gustav Mahler's Eighth Symphony. The concert took place in the Kreuzkirche, which has space for around 3,000 people. The contingent of participants was also huge: the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra was reinforced by members of the symphonic orchestra of Dresden University; the Prague Philharmonic Choir, the Singakademie Dresden, the Dresden University Choir, Dresden's boys' choir and the children's choir of Dresden's Singakademie. The ensemble of soloists was international: Sarah-Jane Brandon, Rachel Willis-Sorensen and Hila Baggio, soprano, Waltraud Meier and Gala el Hadidi, contralto, Lance Ryan, tenor (who standing in for Stefano Secco at short notice due to illness), Christoph Pohl, baritone, and Gabor Bretz, bass. It was a breathtaking, highly intensive interpretation in a wonderful setting. Wellber proved to be a confident and enormously inspired Mahler interpreter who understood how to captivate all participants, as well as the audience of course. The tension was not relaxed at any moment. The conductor displayed an ease at co-ordinating the orchestra of more than 100 musicians and the huge choirs with at least 400 singers. Captivating and enlivening, subtle while at the same time breaking through musical boundaries, magnificent in sound and tender: an Eighth the likes of which we rarely get to hear and therefore a truly superlative Mahler. Omer Meir Wellber is undoubtedly a conductor whose name we must remember!!



Pittsburgh Symphony & Manfred Honeck © Stephan Floss

Two days later it was a concert by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra that almost knocked us off our chairs. Although the Pittsburgh musicians presented a typical tour programme, the interpretations were masterful and beyond all doubt. The PSO is an orchestra that is now playing in the premiere league, together with the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Concertgebouw Orkest.

Manfred Honeck has whipped this orchestra into shape in recent years; now the American musicians are allowed to show that they are capable of Haydn's subtle charm as well as of Liszt's virtuosity and Tchaikovsky's emotional power.

The concert in the Lichthof of the Albertinum started with Haydn's Symphony no. 93. Honeck infused the piece with Viennese character and the PSO followed its conductor unconditionally and with a wonderful sense for the graceful and the earthy, but also for the twinkle in this music.

Next, the young Daniil Trifonov thrilled us with an interpretation of Liszt's first piano concerto that was as exhilarating as it was eccentric (but always correct). After the break Honeck conducted an incredibly exciting and at times lacerated interpretation of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony. The performance delivered by the PSO was breath-taking. A magnificent sound, but never excessive, with a lot of love and feeling for the details made this performance a musical pleasure, thanks to the wonderful musicians, inciting the audience to respond with cheering applause.