

A Russian Sound of Longing

An enthusiastically received guest performance by the Austrian conductor on the shores of Lake Constance

Conductor Manfred Honeck came to Bregenz with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra as part of their European tour.

Manfred Honeck brings the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra to Bregenz. It was high time that conductor Manfred Honeck, who is originally from Vorarlberg, came with 'his' Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) to perform at the Bregenzer Meisterkonzerte: as part of this year's European tour, the world-class American orchestra was now rewarded with an ovation in the Festspielhaus in Bregenz. The Vorarlberg state government used Honeck's presence in the state for a special honour.

There was no inkling that this was the ninth concert in a row during an exhausting tour for this orchestra, which showed off the round sound of its strings, the incredibly homogeneous woodwinds, the alert brass players and percussionists. Honeck opened the programme with three intense, broad chords, dry beats on the timpani and a feverishly eventful motif for strings: Beethoven's Coriolanus Overture is theatre music, rich in contrasts, musical rhetoric and exciting dynamics. In the end the music is extinguished in three plucked pianissimo chords – a great start!

Symbiotic Interplay

The performance by the Russian pianist Daniil Trifonov also brought to mind the hero of a Chekhov play: looking inward, with his hair hanging in his face, he strolls through the orchestra to the grand piano. But then the 25-year-old artist, who has won many awards, unleashes a sound culture that portrays a new world in the very opening bars of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Highly concentrated, with absolutely no show, he opens up in the dark, velvety sounds of the orchestra, sometimes as a part of the whole, sometimes with brilliant peaks of his own.

With his pianissimo culture he is on the same page as Honeck, who shapes the slow movement as a dreamy reverie by the flute, clarinet, strings and pearling piano arpeggios. This allows Trifonov to display his well-dosed hand in the middle section, before returning to wonderful tenderness. In the finale large-scale passages of breathtaking, seemingly effortless virtuosity meet Rachmaninoff's big, longing, romantic themes: Trifonov wins the audience over with crystal-clear figures, much refracted colours and a symbiotic interplay with the orchestra. He shows his thanks for the excited applause with the Fairy Tales, op. 24/3 by Nikolai Medtner, one of Rachmaninoff's Russian contemporaries with German roots.

Manfred Honeck and the PSO went on this tour with the three late, big Tchaikovsky symphonies. In Bregenz they performed the Fifth. The intense

connection between the conductor and his orchestra, the organic breathing and becoming of a sound that seemingly comes from nowhere but can nevertheless develop into a big attack can be felt the whole time. He even binds passages that can come across as gaudy into a rounded sound. The urging sound of fate produced by Tchaikovsky and the longing solo voices among the brass instruments make themselves heard. At the end everything culminates in a jubilant triumphant march that the brass players outshine with a sumptuous legato.

After the enthusiastically received symphony, Manfred Honeck, who was born in Nenzing, trained in Vienna and who now lives in Altdorf again, was given the honorary title of 'Professor'. Manfred Honeck immediately passed on that thank-you to his magnificent orchestra.

For their encore the Pittsburgh musicians presented the dashing, effective Galop by Khachaturian, with a surprising insertion: in an intimate duet with the first violin, the solo clarinet started playing Vorarlberg's state anthem, together with the folk song 'O Hoamatle am himmelblaua Bodasee' – much to the enjoyment of the people of Vorarlberg and the many Upper Swabians present. The orchestra had a break from concerts on Monday. Many musicians used the opportunity to visit the other site of their boss's work – Schloss Wolfegg in the district of Ravensburg, where Manfred Honeck will once again conduct the International Wolfegg Concerts in June.