

Like Clockwork

Manfred Honeck triumphed with the quality of his Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

Bregenz. The debut of the conductor from Vorarlberg, Manfred Honeck, with his Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra at the city's Meisterkonzerte turned out to be a top class artistic and social event in the sold-out Festspielhaus on Sunday. The internationally celebrated top American orchestra along with the young Russian piano soloist Daniil Trifonov thereby gave a particularly successful season a final kick. The audience's excitement about the excellent evening culminated in a wave of heartfelt approval when Honeck was publicly proclaimed professor.

Perfectly rounded

The much-praised PSO immediately set the tone with the first bars of Beethoven's Coriolanus Overture. Hard tutti beats were achieved with the incredible precision of clockwork, a sign of the utmost concentration on the part of the 85 musicians, who all appeared to be sitting on the edge of their seats. Alongside such incredible perfection, the orchestra, in the American manner, also sounds more brilliant and dramatic than its European counterparts. Polished brass dominates during the important highlights, and yet it never comes across as gaudy. The woodwinds are perfectly rounded, the strings sound marvellously silvery and sumptuous.

In its entirety this results in an outstanding approach to sound that has great beauty and brilliance and is full of incredible energy coming from Manfred Honeck, the principal conductor since 2008, and the ideal partner from a human perspective.

Then there are his efforts to open up new access through analytical work on the details of the interpretation, an access that rejects all routine and where nothing is left to chance. An ideal example of this was delivered this time by Honeck with his performance of Tchaikovsky's Fifth, which usually sounds rather well-worn, but which he turned into an exciting feature in the second part with sections of gripping orchestral virtuosity. He perfectly balanced the architectural proportions, emphasizing breaks and departures, and thereby stripping the work of the bombastic, trivial nature it is often accused of having. Not least thanks to a very lively dynamic that reaches all the way to the limits of the open-ended [sic] loudness scale, but which allows the slow movement with the magical horn solo to grow out of nothing. Simply incredible!

Then, at the heart of the concert, so to speak, is Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto no. 2 in C minor with the celebrated 25-year-old Russian soloist Daniil Trifonov. Introverted and seemingly wholly immersed in himself and the work, he still knows he is at one with Honeck and the many soloists at their instruments, when it comes to this romantic concert hall winner, performed in a very sensuous manner.

Folk songs

This climaxes in the finale as a joint exuberance in the soundtrack of a passionate Hollywood blockbuster, voluptuous as big cinema on the big screen. Trifonov's technical excellence is coupled with the ability to produce a fabulous, musical oratory from which emotions and lyrical scenes are created as if spontaneously.

The Steinway also keeps its promises. The artist is reluctant to accept the applause, but has no choice. The orchestra, in spite of its 14-day European tour without any signs whatever of tiring on the road, plays a Galopp by Khachaturian as an encore, garnished with two folk songs from Vorarlberg, the 'Ländle' and 'O Hoamatle', lovingly inserted by the principal violin and the solo clarinet, as a reverential nod to the audience in the conductor's home region.

On 25 and 26 June, Manfred Honeck will be conducting two concerts at his festival in Wolfegg, which will include Mendelssohn's oratorio 'Elijah'.