

Made Up Time!

Martin Grubinger and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

By Katharina Wappel

After a ten-minute delay, Manfred Honeck delivered a rousing performance. The orchestra had an ambitious plan: Haydn's Symphony in D major, Hartl's Percussion Concerto and Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony.

During Haydn's adagio Honeck perfectly captured the spirit of the work. In the finale, the Presto ma non troppo, however, he set the tempo at too troppo [sic], spoken with a tautologous pleonasm [sic]. Things really got going during Bruno Hartl's Percussion Concerto with star percussionist Martin Grubinger. The reaction of some members of the audience suggested they came only for him. In the gallery of the Musiktheater, concertgoers discreetly bent over the balustrade to get a better view of the star. After all, Grubinger serves up a physical performance that's quite something. The composition originally envisaged two instruments (marimba and timpani), but Grubinger had it expanded to 24. The composition includes both virtuoso, explosive moments of sound that blow everything to shreds, and long piano sections that wallow on the threshold of the perceptible. In the cadence Grubinger went full throttle and the visitors above really got their money's worth.

In Tchaikovsky's Symphony in F minor, the soloists, such as the flute and the meaty sound of the cellos, were of particular note. During the final two movements there was a rush towards the end during which much got rather frayed. The time lost at the beginning was easily made up.

Concert

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

Martin Grubinger (percussion)

Manfred Honeck (conductor)

Musikverein

Festwochen, Musikverein: M. Honeck

Cheering for Pittsburgh

A program could not have garnered more applause if it had tried! Opening with Dvořák's Carnival Overture, then Liszt's Piano Concerto no. 1, and finally Tchaikovsky's Fifth. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Manfred Honeck, served up an impressive delivery of the program on the second night in the Musikverein.

The first 'Bravo!' came too soon. The musicians, and the soloist, Daniil Trifonov, were not finished with the Liszt concerto when a member of the audience started cheering. Daniil Trifonov, who is only 25, is a technically sparkling, captivating virtuoso, who expertly masters the work with the greatest commitment and verve. With Trifonov the mechanical never appears to be in the foreground, the performance merely seems brilliant and full of zest. Liszt as fascinating, gripping music.

Manfred Honeck understands how to deliver an absorbing performance with his musicians. The Carnival sounds crisp, somewhat superficial, but definitely perfectly fashioned. Tchaikovsky, meanwhile, is performed in polished perfection by the orchestra, even though listeners will be used to hearing the work with a more harmonious, warmer tone – the brass instruments deliver some particularly hearty clashes. But Honeck is aware of the effects and stages them with joy. A direct approach, straightforward, no ifs, no buts. Thrilling!

Wiener Festwochen, Musikverein:

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra performed in Vienna's Musikverein on three evenings during its European tour under Manfred Honeck. Solo concertos were contrasted with the last Tchaikovsky symphonies.

North American orchestras clearly love Austrian conductors. Franz Welser-Möst, in Cleveland, Manfred Honeck in Pittsburgh... the latter demonstrated during the Festwochen concerts how harmoniously the partnership with one of the great, old-established US orchestras has been working since 2009 [sic].

With Haydn for example, who was up first. Honeck knew how to inspire his musicians to deliver an accentuated, historically well-informed performance with his Symphony in D major (Hob I:93). The Pittsburgh musicians proved to be a well-oiled orchestra in all groups, with a very proper, but then somewhat too sweeping sound that lacks specificity.

The magnificent percussionist Martin Grubinger was nevertheless perfectly at home in the orchestra. He was furiously agile as he switched between the xylophone, timpani, tam-tams and other percussion instruments for Bruno Hartl's Percussion Concerto, turning the neatly constructed composition into the event of the evening.

Tchaikovsky's Fourth, which followed on from it, was very neatly executed but lacked the tension it ultimately needed, even when Honeck drove the orchestra to near-unplayable speed in the finale.

It was a similar story on the third night, when sombre music was on the program. Leonidas Kavakos was convincing as an outstanding soloist in Alban Berg's Violin Concerto, the intimate swan song for Manon Gropius, the 'angel', who died at a young age. After that came Tchaikovsky's last symphony, his Pathétique. It too was filled with despair, resignation, farewell and death. Once again Honeck proved to be an outstanding co-ordinator who pays attention to clear contours, optimal tempi and a transparent sound with attention to detail. And yet he didn't manage to penetrate into the disturbing existential depths of the music.