

Against all odds

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's concert tour brings one of the finest US orchestras to Europe, one which breaks new ground off-stage.

Pittsburgh – the name still has an impressive ring in Germany. America's old steel capital once was one of the richest cities in the US. In 1893, the first Ferris wheel was constructed here, in 1903 the first beer can, and in 1953 the first building with a façade made entirely of aluminum. In 1869 a company was founded in Pittsburgh that would soon be the leading ketchup manufacturer world-wide, in 1895 a symphony orchestra, and in 1935, businessman Edgar Kaufmann commissioned architect Frank Lloyd Wright to build him a weekend home in the scenic Appalachian Mountains, an hour's drive south of the city.

Then came the steel crisis that ended the boom. Kaufmann's huge department store has been vacant for years. The Heinz group merged with its competitor Kraft, and is now being controlled out of Chicago.

And with a population of 2.3 million, the metropolitan area of Pittsburgh barely makes it into the 30 largest in the US. Nevertheless, the city in western Pennsylvania in recent years has managed to get back on its feet. Prioritizing the education and medicine sectors has paid off. Although the average income is still low, the downtown district ranks as one of the most vibrant in the entire country. The Penguins have just won the Stanley Cup again, the Steelers hold the record for the most Super Bowl titles, and Fallingwater has long been the world's most famous weekend home. The city - photogenically set at the confluence of two large rivers that flow into the Ohio River - now has a new skyline with glass constructions that almost dwarf the remaining buildings, dating to the turn of the last century. But some of the architectural gems have survived. One of them certainly is "Heinz Hall", located at the heart of the nightlife district. Its classicist exterior is unpretentious, its interior splendid, almost gaudy – and gargantuan. The 2,700-seat theater, originally built in 1927 as a cinema, has been, since 1971, the home of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, one of the city's two cultural beacons (the other being the Andy Warhol Museum – Warhol was born in Pittsburgh).

Influenced by an amazing number of conductors, either from a German-speaking country or educated there – like Victor Herbert and Emil Paur in the early 20th century, later by Otto Klemperer and Fritz Reiner, the Cologne native William Steinberg und Berlin-born André Previn – the Pittsburgh Orchestra has long ranked as one of the best in the USA. Under Lorin Maazel, who grew up in Pittsburgh, it has toured many foreign countries since 1984. Insider tip Mariss Jansons, appointed as chief conductor as of 1995, proved to be a lucky choice. So was the hiring of Manfred Honeck. The Viennese, who is a regular guest with the Berlin, Viennese, and New York Philharmonic Orchestras, is full of praise for his musicians. What impresses him most is "their flexibility, their energy, and their ability to go to extremes", but also that the orchestra has managed to preserve its "identity". After

nine years under the meticulous direction of thoroughbred musician Honeck, the Pittsburgh orchestra (in the old German seating arrangement) not only performs succulent pieces of the Romantic period with brilliant brass and warm woodwinds, a sometimes ardent, sometimes furious Mozart – it even plays an absolutely authentic Viennese waltz!

The big question is if the orchestra will be able to retain Honeck beyond 2020, who time and again is being considered for the most prestigious directorial positions. For even if they play in the global “orchestra champions league”, as Honeck calls it – Pittsburgh at the same time is the financially weakest of the top 10 orchestras in the US. At least according to Christian Schörnich. The Chief Operating Officer is a kind of managing director, while president Melia Tourangeau is largely in charge of the orchestra’s public relations, contact with the management, and fundraising. Born in Mönchengladbach, the trained singer and master of business administration, who has previously worked for the UN in New York and moved to Pittsburgh for the sake of his wife, a musician, has had a turbulent first year in office – including a six-week strike by the musicians. Their demand: a twelve percent pay raise; management was offering a 25% cut!

In this context it is important to know that American orchestras are not run by the state, but a sort of association that employs musicians who are effectively “unfireable”. Backed by a strong union, the orchestra as a whole, but also its individual members, negotiates its salary with the management that is also employed by the association. Management’s job is then to raise the necessary funds by whatever means – admission fees, fundraising, or endowments, some of which e.g. may be used only for international concert tours. In Pittsburgh, only ten percent of the budget is covered by the city. While German orchestras are state-funded, and freelance orchestras get to distribute revenues among themselves, in the US it is management that is accountable. If revenues don’t match guaranteed salaries, the orchestra goes bankrupt. A peculiar system.

A system that works only if strong sponsors and patrons fill the gap. Manfred Honeck has made sure his contract involves a clause releasing him from sponsored advertising – which he does anyway – and gladly – as he says. “Because they are great people, who show initiative, and support the orchestra with great enthusiasm.”

Although more than 7,000 donors support the Pittsburgh Orchestra, the lion’s share of the budget is raised by less than ten private individuals and foundations. Two or three of these cancelling their donations could spell the demise of the ensemble. As Christian Schörnich puts it, a much too unstable basis for 96 members of a major-league-orchestra, especially as the musicians do not seem to be aware of the danger, because so far everything has worked out fine. Thus, the only COO of an US orchestra with no professional music experience strives to break the mold after having weathered a strike and barely secured funding. He has downsized and restructured the management team, is developing the social media sector, working on a digital strategy that will generate additional

revenue, and targeting specific audience groups that he wants to offer individual event packages, from getting to the theater to the after-show lounge. The internet-friendly members of the “Young Professionals Club”, for instance, are supposed to receive discounts in one of the foyer bars, while the older core audience by means of special offers is lured into another. A simple, yet remarkable idea. There are plans for a daytime restaurant and a gift store to boost merchandizing sales. Despite his many new ideas, the trained singer wants to avoid alienating the “purists” by making sure to always put the music and its cultural value first.

German theatergoers can be quite put off by the endless lists of sponsors in the program booklets, or the orchestra chairs named after patrons. But knowing that an orchestra in the USA could not survive without its generous aficionados makes people more tolerant. And makes them wonder how this system can even work, especially at such an astoundingly high level.

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra regularly demonstrates its quality on its CDs – the next one featuring Schostakowitsch und Barber will be released on April 18. Concert tours round out the picture. Like the upcoming tour that will bring the orchestra and Manfred Honeck, accompanied by Anne-Sophie Mutter or Matthias Goerne to Wiesbaden, Salzburg, Grafenegg, London, Lucerne, and Bucharest. The program will include Lutoslawski, Dvořák, Tschaikowsky, Mahler, Beethoven, and Adams. And afterwards, perhaps some delighted concert-goers will post tweets or send text messages ending with a smiley. Another Pittsburgh invention.

Captions:

Manfred Honeck, chief conductor since 2008

Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra on the stage of Heinz Hall