

BBC Proms: Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Honeck — confident

This was the sound of an orchestra secure in its own identity



Anne-Sophie Mutter performs Dvořák's Violin Concerto with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra at the BBC Proms © Chris Christodoulou

In an increasingly homogenised world, where orchestras often “speak” with the same musical accent, it is good to find one confident in its own identity. Manfred Honeck's Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra is about as confident as it gets. Its brass sound in particular is positively gladiatorial. Subtlety is not this ensemble's defining characteristic, but what it does, it does well: plunder music for every scrap of drama and amplify it. So it was in a good position to handle this Prom's opening work. Written in 1995 for Simon Rattle's 40th birthday, John Adams's *Lollapalooza* — a word suggesting something large and outlandish — fully justifies its title. It is a cannonball of a piece, whose rhythmic propulsion and jazzy boisterousness demand a lot of gunpowder. The orchestra delivered it, and the result hit the mark. Perhaps some of that powder was still lingering in the air when German violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter walked on stage. That might help to explain why she played Dvořák's Violin Concerto as though she had a train to catch. The first and last movements peddled virtuosity for its own sake. The middle movement piled on the saccharine, with the aid of soupy glissandi. All of which might serve her well in a Paganini Caprice, or perhaps even Tchaikovsky. But this is middle-period Dvořák, whose very strength is its sense of naive simplicity. The orchestra delivered an overly perfumed, overly theatrical performance which, like Mutter's, missed the point. A sense of theatre, however, goes a long way in Mahler's First Symphony, which followed after the interval.

This was an amazingly elastic performance that embraced the work's emotional extremes, but held back when it needed to. The sense of wonder in the first movement was beautifully managed, as was the exuberance of the second. In the funeral march of the third movement Honeck did a fine job of underlining the jagged mood swings. And he achieved it all with one eye firmly on the bigger picture, meaning that when his players let rip for the work's final climax, the sheer force was startling. ★★☆☆☆

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