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Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra as guest in Berlin Escapism and world weariness

At the Philharmonie, the guests from the USA impress with Bruckner's Ninth Symphony, while Igor Levit's interpretation of Mozart causes disconcertment.

By Frederik Hanssen

Quite ludicrous: Igor Levit switches his iPad on for the cadenza, of all things, in order to play from music. Yet it is precisely the cadenza marking that moment within an instrumental concerto when the soloist is completely at liberty: to improvise freely, to play with the melodic material of the score. Igor Levit, on the other hand, has written down his thoughts on the first movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 22 and, on Tuesday at the Philharmonie, adheres precisely to his notes. Which is surprising for this pianist in particular, who otherwise memorizes the craziest, most complex works for his recitals.

On the other hand, the 32-year-old is also known for doing things differently than one is wont. For instance, his appearance in the course of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's Berlin guest performance was rather strange with regard to his interaction with the audience. Levit pretends that the galleries of the Philharmonie are completely empty. Indeed, he seems to have virtually covered himself and his grand piano with an imaginary woollen blanket, so introverted, so world-enraptured appears his playing.

Levit's interpretation, which is as delicate as can be, is undoubtedly the result of an intensive process of analysis. However, it quickly tires the ear, because this pianissimo delicacy also remains poor in contours and thus seems monotonous. Yet why entrenches the performer himself in an ivory tower, why does he absolutely refuse to make contact with the audience, why does he not feel the urge to communicate his knowledge about the work in a comprehensible way? Levit leaves these questions unanswered. Nevertheless, on Tuesday, many in the hall are pleased with his interpretation of Mozart.

Honeck shapes extremely large arches in Bruckner

Manfred Honeck, chief conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra since 2008, has a greater sense of mission. The way he structures Anton Bruckner's last symphony allows the listeners to think for themselves, without the performance becoming a dry exertion. This is as Honeck also wants to transport the emotions that bothered the deeply religious composer, misunderstood during his entire lifetime, during the creative process of the Ninth Symphony.

It is impressive how Manfred Honeck keeps the tension in the almost half-hour opening movement, how he spans a very wide arch. The musicians from Pittsburgh react to each of his motions with seismographic sensitivity, creating a constantly rising and falling sound stream of enormous density, even beyond the general rests typical for Bruckner.

From the inside, the music here develops with compelling logic; the scherzo is cuttlingly sharp, its pulse relentless, interspersed with ironic Ländler intermezzi. The fact that Honeck keeps the sound rather monochrome, sometimes almost turning it into a metallic white, is explained from the end: the sigh of pain that rises from the final string cantilenas hits the audience all the more strongly.