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The piano surrenders to Rachmaninov

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra began its tour of Europe at the Alte Oper Frankfurt with Manfred Honeck and pianist Igor Levit.

By Markus Kuhn

The orchestra arrived in such a large line-up that it completely filled the stage. The strings beguiled with the fullness of their warm sound and at the same time with their synchronous accuracy. The brass fraction appeared homogeneous, radiant and with mighty reserves of power. The elegiac "Larghetto for Orchestra" by James MacMillan is more "sensitive" than avant-garde. Its thematic core is the psalm tone scheme of the "Miserere". Rachmaninov's "Paganini Rhapsody" is far more than just a loose series of 24 variations, it is based on an inner programme and could be choreographed.

To this extent, Igor Levit created the piano part rich in punch lines and, together with Manfred Honeck and the orchestra, brought out exciting details, jazzy harmonies, rich bass foundations and even dissonances cutting with relish. In the beginning, however, there were still problems with synchronicity, and Levit's playing took on surprisingly coarse traits at times. The pauses, occasionally agogically overstretched, bordered hard on mannerism, same in the encore of "Danny Boy" in bar-piano style.

Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, dated 1937, is a good example of Shostakovich's Janus-faced character and his reception. At first, the work was regarded as affirmative statecraft, due to party principles, nowadays its suspiciously hollow, rejoicing Finale is unanimously regarded as an act of subtle protest. Honeck approached the outer movements forcefully and swiftly, and all the orchestral sections played excellently. Yet, whether the immaculately polished sound of the brass, confidently cultivated even in the roaring forte, also complies with Shostakovich's concept of sound, may be questioned. Encores by Satie and Prokofiev. Persistent applause.