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Tradition and Modernity

Igor Levit and Pittsburgh Symphony at Pro Musica

By Stefan Arndt

Mozart's 22nd Piano Concerto is different from the others. The composer, who was otherwise rather unwilling to experiment with the form of his pieces, has mixed highly diverse elements into one score: the concerto is also a wind serenade, Sinfonia concertante, chamber music. Only one thing it is not - a virtuoso piece enabling the soloist to shine technically. Those who put this piece on their programme do not have to prove anything to anyone anymore. This has pertained to pianist Igor Levit, still young, for a long time.

Together with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the 32-year-old has now played the concert in the Kuppelsaal for the season opening of Pro Musica. Under the baton of Manfred Honeck, the US-American orchestra cultivates an almost extinct Mozart culture that is more oriented towards Karl Böhm than Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Yet, the special character of the work comes into effect quite well with a large cast and soft phrasing.

Tension is created above all by the seemingly casual, feather-light playing of the soloist, who strolls like a flâneur through the episodes of the concerto, making a comment here, accompanying there and sometimes just observing silently. It is fascinating how Levit charges the notes with more and more meaning the further he reduces their weight. When he closes a Rondo turn in the last movement with a single soft tone, the whole work seems to be reflected in that tone.

Honeck has a very traditional approach to Bruckner's 9th Symphony as well, with partly doubled wind instruments. Some things in this late work sound somewhat liberally applied and oversweet, but there are also moments of great beauty.