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Emotionally involved

Lang Lang and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra at the Gasteig

By Klaus P. Richter

Right from first bars of Mozart, a special sound culture was heralded by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, which is currently touring Europe. And when, on the Steinway, pianist Lang Lang played the first bars of the C minor Piano Concerto (K491) as a manifesto of dark passion, which is rare in Mozart's work, and soon built up iridescent tension through the threatening diminished seventh chords, this marked the beginning of a great evening at the Philharmonie im Gasteig. Immersing himself in the introversion of the poignant side themes of the E-flat major Larghetto against the militant, rebellious main theme, Lang Lang then movingly fought out the conflict between light and darkness in the second movement.

What distinguishes Lang Lang from many star pianists is his emotional identification with the music, which he radiates so carefreely and visibly that it often arouses the displeasure of more cerebrally centered spirits. Wrongfully so - because it only shows what Bach's son Karl [sic!] Philipp Emanuel had already demanded, namely that only a player who is also moved himself might move the audience. In the figure work of the variations in the final movement with an exuberant coda, he added an animated effort to make contact with the orchestra. At last, he gave free rein to his unleashed virtuosity in two short encores. What was already so impressive in Mozart became a sensation in Anton Bruckner's last, unfinished symphony. Manfred Honeck, the Austrian, who has been at the helm in Pittsburgh since 2008, demonstrated overwhelming Bruckner expertise together with his orchestra. He steered it through the dramatic patterns of the climactic waves, grim to ghostly in the F sharp major Scherzo, miraculous in the subtlest shades of the final Adagio and orgiastic in the forte outbursts: a demonstration of American orchestral potency and a breathtaking Bruckner.