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Musikfest Berlin begins with a live Webcast of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

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Musikfest Berlin is one of the most important European music festivals, providing orchestras, conductors, and soloists from around the world with an opportunity to converge in Berlin. The festival is jointly organized by the Berliner Festspiele and the Berliner Philharmoniker Foundation, with the Berliner Philharmoniker providing the primary venues for performance. This year, because of that venue, the opening concert was given a live Webcast through the Digital Concert Hall. Admission was

from the Digital Concert Hall Web site



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free for all cyberspace visitors, although first-time visitors were required to register by creating an Digital Concert Hall account and password.

The concert featured the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under the baton of their Music Director, Manfred Honeck. The guest soloist was violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, performing Witold Lutosławski's "Łańcuch II" (chain II), a "dialogue" for violin and orchestra, which she had premiered in 1985. This was preceded by a suite for string orchestra composed by Leoš Janáček in his early twenties (one might say before his music started sounding like Janáček). The second half of the program was devoted entirely to Richard Strauss' Opus 40 tone poem, "Ein Heldenleben" (a hero's life). Honeck had thus prepared a program that would present his ensemble in an assortment of significantly different lights.

As might be imagined, Strauss provided the best platform for the Pittsburgh to satisfy “the usual expectations” for a symphony orchestra. This piece serves up not only a diverse palette of ensemble sonorities but also opportunities for a variety of solo voices. The most extensive work is provided by the concertmaster, whose instrument represents “The hero’s companion,” Strauss’ wording for his wife, Pauline, and her support for his own “heroic” self. However, both wind and brass players have ample opportunities for solo work, as does the leader of the cello section.

For all its instrumental virtues, however, “Heldenleben” poses major challenges to the conductor. It is relatively late (but not last) in the canon of Strauss’ tone poems; and it predates “Salome,” his first significant opera (even if the entire narrative was confined to a single act). As was just suggested, the narrative of “Heldenleben” is more than loosely autobiographical, which is a bit ironic when one considers that Strauss was only 34 at the time he composed it. (It is equally ironic that, beginning with “Salome,” *none* of Strauss’ operas have any character that can reasonably be called a “hero figure.”) Perhaps the most similar effort would have been the untitled poem (later called “Song of Myself”) that Walt Whitman published in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* when he was 36.

In many respects Strauss’ rhetoric parallels Whitman’s shamelessly self-promoting use of language. This is good for the performing musicians, since the music is, ultimately, about “blowing your own horn” (metaphorically, when not literally). On the other hand the full score goes on for over half an hour, galumphing its way through six episodes, whose temporal allocations are not particularly well balanced.

Most importantly, this is music with too many climaxes. Thus, one is faced with the same sort of problem that often confronts conducting a score by Anton Bruckner or Gustav Mahler. As I have put it in earlier pieces, one needs to prioritize these climaxes, imagining them as constituting a metaphorical landscape. It is then up to the conductor to provide enough scrutiny to the score to establish his own point of view as to where the “highest peak” in that landscape is. Once that peak is determined, the conductor may then shape his/her approach to crescendo and decrescendo to make sure that the peak is recognized as such by the listeners.

Listening to Honeck conduct “Heldenleben,” it was hard to discern just where he wanted that highest peak to be. There was no shortage of grand gestures coming from the

Pittsburgh ensemble. The problem was that, after a while, they struck the listener less as narrative and more as Winston Churchill's definition of history (which tends to apply equally well to autobiography) as "one damned thing after another."

In contrast, it is likely that Lutosławski was *not* following a similar model of a landscape of climaxes, nor is it apparent that he would have thought of many of his compositions having either a literal or figurative narrative arc. Rather, "Łańcuch II" comes from a time when Lutosławski was experimenting with the interplay (dialogue?) between the well-defined structures determined by a grammatical syntax and those structures that emerge in the mind of a listener confronted with aleatory techniques. "Łańcuch II" was composed shortly after a five-movement partita in which the opportunities for improvisation provided by the eighteenth-century "double" were replaced by ad libitum movements allowing for much freer improvisation. In "Łańcuch II," that "controlled aleatoricism" scales up to the interplay between a violin soloist and a full orchestra. In such ad libitum passages, one could see Honeck cuing the entry of different sections of the orchestra, but that was all he was doing.

This makes for an entirely different landscape than one encounters in the rich tonal structures of the late nineteenth century. The result is fascinating, even if it is not particularly easy to apprehend on the basis of a single listening experience. Nevertheless, the attentive listener will readily accept why and how Lutosławski chose to call this composition a dialogue. Even if one is unfamiliar with the language in which that dialogue is being conducted, he has endowed the exchange with a wealth of unique rhetorical gestures, through which one can follow the flow of that dialogue in its "broad strokes," regardless of whether or not the specific details are more elusive. In this context one could only admire the way in which Mutter and Honeck served as "conversants" and hope for more opportunities to give "Łańcuch II" the attentive listening it deserves.

Considering the substance of "Łańcuch II," however, one can understand why Honeck opted for a relatively lightweight opening. In many respects Janáček's suite shares with Lutosławski's partita a reflection on an eighteenth-century tradition. However, as previously observed, Janáček had not yet found his own voice when he composed this suite; so his rhetoric was grounded more in late nineteenth-century idioms (such as one might find in the music of Antonín Dvořák) than in any suites of the Baroque repertoire. This made for a rather low-key approach to introducing the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra to a European audience; but it also established an ensemble with a command of traditional fundamentals

before launching into Lutosławski's far-from-traditional demands.

Microphone pickup made it difficult to identify the first encore, apparently an orchestral arrangement by Max Reger (without voice) of a song by Franz Schubert [**added 9/1, 7:30 a.m.: D. 343 "Am Tage Aller Seelen"**]. The second encore, however, was far more familiar, the final waltz from the orchestral suite Strauss had prepared from the score for his opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. This is the most raucous moment of the opera; and Honeck conducted it with a gusto that would have been entirely appropriate for any well-staged production. If the concert had begun with a sense of soothing assurance, then it concluded with the high spirits that would naturally be associated with a major music festival.