

## With joy

**Classical: After the Grafenegg festival, the Chinese pianist, currently on tour with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, will be at Pleyel on Friday.**

By Eric Dahan, special correspondent to Grafenegg (Austria)

It's a commune in the district of Krems, in lower Austria, bordered by the Wagram hills and the vineyard plains of the Wachau. In fact, Grafenegg can be summed up in the countryside that surrounds a Tudor chateau where, as one might suspect, the gardens blossom and the sun beats down in the summer. This site, planted with hundred-year-old trees and bordered to the east by the nexus of the Danube and the Kamp River, is hosting a festival for the sixth consecutive year.

In charge of its direction is pianist Rudolf Buchbinder, still lauded for his recent recording under Sony of Mozart's *Concertos No. 23 and No. 25* under the baton of Nikolaus Harnoncourt. The esteem that Buchbinder enjoys from the major conductors and orchestras explains why they all RSVP'd as soon as he invited them to the festival. Those in attendance were no less than the London Symphony Orchestra, the Mariinsky of Saint Petersburg, the Vienna and Munich Philharmonic, conductors such as Valéry Gergiev, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Kazushi Ono, sopranos Diana Damrau and Eva Marie Westbroek, violinists Frank Peter Zimmermann, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Janine Jansen, and Vadim Repin—and many other famous pianists.

**GOTHIC.** On this 29<sup>th</sup> of August, the concrete open-air amphitheater, poised like a UFO a hundred meters from the gothic chateau, presents the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, their musical director Manfred Honeck and the invited soloist: pianist Yuja Wang. She arrives around 3pm, installs herself in front of the Steinway and throws herself into Tchaikovsky's *Concerto No. 1*, all the while repressing many yawns with great difficulty. When she was discovered a few years ago, she subjugated the audience with the architectural rigor of her interpretations of Liszt and Chopin, the fluidity of her octave runs, her absence of sentimentalism and emphasis, and her arresting openness. Upon finishing a repeat, she returns to her dressing room. "The piano sounded metallic, no? It rings like a harpsichord," she exclaims, while a few dozen meters away, the tuners work to resolve the issue. On her cellphone, she shows off the cover of her CD, which will be released January 3 on Deutsche Grammophon: Rachmaninov's *Concerto No. 3* and Prokofiev's *Concerto No. 2*, recorded with conductor Gustavo Dudamel.

**DISCIPLINE.** Here she poses in modern geisha fashion, dress painted with flowers and false eyelashes by Mata Hari. "You like it?" Without transition, she passes to the picture of a young man: "Oh this, this is the last one. 22 years old, Vienna, not bad..." She could speak about literature or painting because under her Rihanna-like façade, she is cultivated. But knowing that we will only judge her on her musical performances, she saves herself the effort and recounts the most recent orchestras she's played with, which she places in two groups: those where she has met cute, young musicians, and the others.

She explains that she is linked to concerts and hasn't set foot in her New York apartment in six months, a fact that doesn't phase her French fans, many of which have marked each of her appearances at the Pleyel a triumph since 2008. The secret of her success is her independence: fresh out of the Beijing Conservatory, she left her parents at the age of 14 to study at the Mount Royal University of Calgary in Canada, then at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. But it is also her iron will, without which the last ten years spent playing all over the world would have gotten the better of artistic integrity. Although she has already performed Tchaikovsky's *No. 1* a hundred times, she

locks herself away for an hour in her dressing room to revise it before the concert. As soon as night falls, a different Yuja Wang walks on stage. Conquering, concentrated, and determined, she does justice to the overall form while refining the details.

With the nerves of Ferrari, the way in which the winds rise up to an infinitesimal, full-spirited *portamento*, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra is a perfect pairing for this sophisticated soloist, whose catalogue of colors and dynamic nuances will always be apparent. If she strikes us as more potent than Daniil Trifonov and Behzod Abdurimov combined, if her playing can difficultly be called tender and poetic, Yuja Wang is no less a prodigious musician, capable of scintillating, explosive rhythm like rounded, weightless acoustics. After the intermission, the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Manfred Honeck remain in St. Petersburg in spirit, but in painfully offering a plastically spotless, insufficiently poignant rendition of Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5*. As an encore, a pastoral page of *Carmen* followed by a furious *Gallop* by Khachaturia, intended to dispel any doubt regarding the power that the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra has left in its motor. One can hardly imagine Parisians not succumbing to this offensive of charm.

**PROSODIE: The conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra evokes Tchaikovsky and Strauss while he directs "A Hero's Life" in Paris.**

## **Manfred Honeck: "The challenge: to do justice to all of his styles"**

Born in 1958 in Nenzing, Austria, Manfred Honeck learned the violin and the viola. He was a member of the Vienna Philharmonic before becoming musical director of the Zurich Opera in 1991. Since 2008, he fulfills his duties at the head of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, a major American orchestra that has been at the hands of Richard Strauss, Leopold Stokowski, Fritz Reiner, Leonard Bernstein, as well as Lorin Maazel and Mariss Jansons.

**In 2008, you were offered the head of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra: a dream for a Viennese musician. Why did you prefer Pittsburgh?**

For the energy. It's an active, modern orchestra that likes to better itself, which is fortunate considering that I'm obsessed with details. These musicians know that if we haven't carefully honed something, we can't wait for a miracle the night of the concert. Nothing is worse than routine when it comes to music. An audience has gone out of its way to be there and has the right to take with them an emotional experience. I try to conserve the clarity and the unique rebound of the brass of the orchestra, all while bringing the roundness and softness required by certain composers and works. The challenge is to do justice to all the styles, all while retaining a musical identity, which always functions in relation to the language of any given country. In spite of globalization, I think that certain orchestras have a unique sound; otherwise, what is the point in touring?

**Isn't it wrong to think that we can impress the public with an overdone work like Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*?**

I don't think so. If the work is famous, it's because it's good. We have to ask ourselves the same questions we usually do. As a Viennese, I know how to play a waltz, but how do I interpret a Russian waltz? In marking only the first time, to create a natural rubato. In the same way, concerning the pizzicato of the second movement, I make sure to point out that it's a phrase over two measures. With regards to the last movement, it is so littered with hemiolas and syncopated rhythm that one has to know how to exalt: Tchaikovsky is a ballet composer, sensitive to the ways in which the people of his country danced. Under a frame of epic and romance, all of his works are narrated by folklore.

**In Paris, you also present *A Hero's Life* by Richard Strauss. How do we teach**

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## **Americans to interpret this particular alchemy of picaresque pantheism and nostalgia?**

First of all, it must be known that the work, which has a stupid title, refers to Strauss. The chromatic ultra-staccato phrase, written for the English horn, mimics for example the sound of a typewriter just to the "kling" that marks the stop of the carriage. Other phrases, chords, are an allusion to the fierce critic Edward Hanslick; therefore, one must hear the German intonation when we play Strauss. With regards to the violin solo, it's an allegory to his wife, Pauline de Ahna. At this moment, he is speaking to her and he is not listening; he continues to read his journal. The trumpet plays a quintuplet that signifies, "Well shut it, then!" Then the violin plays a shrill glissando, representing rising blood pressure, followed by a pizzicato that indicates that she's hit him. It's not as though this is written down somewhere, but if you've read a biography of Richard Strauss and conducted his operas, especially *The Knight of the Rose*, you know how to recognize the major characters in his life.

## **During your eight years with Vienna Philharmonic, you were conducted by the greatest of conductors, Karajan and Bernstein. What did you learn from them?**

I admired the technique of the repetition of Karajan, polishing all the timbres to obtain a blended sound. And with Bernstein, I liked the emotional spontaneity. But it was Carlos Kleiber who really inspired me: he hated when we counted time in a measure. Even in symphonic music, he remained an opera conductor, pursuing expression above all. "Forget the notes and the bars and the measures, make music," he would tell us. It's risky, but the result was astounding.

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