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Preview

Manfred Honeck conducts The Cleveland Orchestra in its four-concert season finale this weekend

by Mike Telin

This weekend The Cleveland Orchestra concludes its 2012-13 Severance Hall season with four concerts beginning on Thursday, May 23 and running through Sunday afternoon, May 26. The performances, under the direction of Manfred Honeck in his Cleveland Orchestra debut, include Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*, Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* featuring the German-born, London-based pianist, Lars Vogt, and the Cleveland premiere of Swedish composer Rolf Martinsson's *Open Mind*. This series also includes a popular KeyBank Friday@7 series concert with a pre-concert performance by saxophonist Bobby Selvaggio and a post-concert party featuring the Brooklyn, N.Y. based funk band MOKAAD.

Austrian-born conductor Manfred Honeck attended the Academy of Music in Vienna studying violin and viola, and spent more then ten years as a member of the Vienna Philharmonic and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra. Following his decision to pursue a conducting path, Honeck has held positions at the Zurich Opera House, MDR Symphony Orchestra Leipzig, Norwegian National Opera, Staatsoper Stuttgart and the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra. Honeck also served as principal guest conductor of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra from 2008 to 2011, a position he will resume from 2013 to 2016. In North America, Manfred Honeck is most well known as music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony, a post he was appointed to in 2007.

Manfred Honeck is a fascinating conversationalist. His soft-spoken, thoughtful nature makes you feel as though you're speaking with a dear friend. Perhaps this has something to do with having grown up in a large family in the Austrian Alps which is documented in an engaging feature that ran in the Pittsburg Post-Gazette following his appointment to the Pittsburgh Symphony.

We reached Manfred Honeck by telephone in Prague and found him to be very interested in knowing more about a recent event in Cleveland that had made the international news — after which we talked about why he chose this program for his Cleveland debut.

Manfred Honeck: First, I think that these three pieces are great and I found out the Tchaikovsky has not been played in some time, I'm not sure how long, but it was a wish

from the orchestra. [I think] it is one of those pieces where there are a lot of new things to discover [like] the folkloristic elements.

Beethoven's piano concerto was also a wish from the symphony. I have had the pleasure of working with Lars Vogt, and he's one of those pianists who plays Beethoven extremely well. I've done the third with him and it's always very beautiful and a very elegant and noble sound.

And the orchestra wanted something that had not been performed in Cleveland. I commissioned Rolf Martinsson's *Open Mind* in 2005 and I think it's a very nice opener. [It's very expressive] and has a lot of colors. Martinsson takes a lot of [compositional] freedom and there are spontaneous elements in it, which is why it is called *Open Mind*. I think it's a very good piece.

Mike Telin: I've listened to excerpts and what I have heard I like very much. I must confess that I did not know the name Martinsson but it's fun to discover new composers.

MH: Yes it enriches your life, and in Scandinavia there are a lot of young composers. I'm not just speaking of Finland, but also of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, they all have a rich musical life. But even in Germany and Austria we don't know much about that, for us [Scandinavia] is still far away. But I think it's good to bring a little bit of what they do to other parts of Europe and also to the United States.

MT: Back to the Tchaikovsky — I often wonder what more there is to discover in works like this, but in September of 2008 The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette wrote, "Going through a musical score with Mr. Honeck is like visiting a tourist attraction with an expert local guide. He constantly points out things that have been long forgotten…" I've been reading this same comment about you quite a bit and I'm curious to know what you do to keep pieces like the Tchaikovsky fresh?

MH: That's a good question and an important one because freshness and having the audience feel like they are hearing a world premiere of a piece is very important to me. For example, let's go to Beethoven's world. He did a lot of new things like using trombones and [musical experiments] which we are used to, and might be getting bored of a little bit because we expect all these things, we know them already. But when audiences heard them the first time they were shocked. And to bring these pieces back, I need to sharpen the dissonances in order to make them more clear and [to sound like] something new and unusual.

This also happens with Mahler; to disconnect him from his surroundings and his experiences in Austria would be I think a little difficult because he heard all the folk tunes, and the [many ways] of playing them. If you [look at his scores] you realize that Mahler has noted many things in them, but many things he did not because he knew that musicians would play [the folk tunes the way they knew them]. But this is just how I look at it and it doesn't mean that other views are not [valid] because I do admire a lot of interpretations.

So going back to Tchaikovsky, I think it is important to know what the substantial character of the music is, and to bring it out you need to go a little bit into the Russian tradition

and [ask yourself] what is new? What is the context and the meaning of the relationships between the movements?

There is a story, and I don't know whether it is true but it is said that Tchaikovsky had met Brahms in Hamburg, and asked him to listen to his new fifth symphony. So Brahms went to the rehearsal and afterwards Tchaikovsky asked him what he thought. And Brahms said, the first, second and third movements are nice, but he didn't like the fourth movement. And of course Brahms could not like it because German composers of that time were still thinking [stylistically] along the lines of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and in the fourth movement what Tchaikovsky did was to use Russian folkloristic elements. So Brahms could not understand it.

When you look [inside the symphony] you feel the richness of the Russian folk music, you hear the balalaika, you hear the march at the end of the first movement that goes into the darkness. By the way, the second movement starts out of the darkness, so my dream would be that I could do them *attacca*, but that is not possible because all the people start to cough so the practical thing is not possible.

When the march comes back in the end it is a triumphal march, but not one where somebody has a military victory, this is a personal victory of Tchaikovsky who struggled with his emotions all the time. So this is the reason why my interpretation will be more like singing. And hopefully I can do this.

This is only an example but if you look at [these things] you'll suddenly realize that this is a great symphony, and people will feel [like they are hearing it for] the first time.

MT: Now that you are into your tenure with Pittsburgh, and this is your first job as a music director in North America, has anything in particular surprised you?

MH: Actually there have been no surprises. I have had a very positive experience I must say, everywhere in America, not only in Pittsburgh. The support and professionalism is extreme but this I knew before. In Europe we always say that American orchestras are fantastic and so well prepared.

Some people talk about the European sound or the American sound and I don't think this is the right thing to say, because what is a European sound? The Vienna Philharmonic plays quite differently from the Berlin Philharmonic or the London Symphony, so what are we talking about and which Europe do we mean? The same is true in America. And although I have never conducted Cleveland, the reputation is fantastic and they have kept their own tradition. Chicago, New York and Pittsburgh, they all have their own way of playing which is just fantastic and my personal wish is that they never change. I think it is so good that we have different ways of playing. That's also the reason orchestras should go on tour, because if every orchestra in the world sounded the same, why should I go hear a guest orchestra? There would be no reason.

So the globalization in the music industry is very dangerous. I don't like that personally. I think it's so good that if I want to go to a Cleveland concert I want the Cleveland sound and their way of playing because it is so special. It's the same with the other orchestras.

MT: Thank you so much for talking. One last question: has growing up in the way that you did impacted the way you look at life in general?

MH: I think you will agree with me that I had a happy time. I was protected from so many things which later on we all have to experience as part of our life. But to grow up in contact with nature, animals and also in my case being part of a big family [was wonderful]. We had no TV and only a very small radio and record player with only three or four discs. So [my family] went on walks through the mountains and talked, we communicated. I'm not sure I can explain it as a spiritual experience but [there is something about] being connected with nature.

Everything was very simple, even the food. We had meat for example only on Sunday, the rest always potatoes and other special Austrian dishes.

I don't want to say that the way kids are growing up [today] is wrong, I'm only saying that because I grew up the way that I did, I was concentrating more on the environment and nature and let that influence my body and soul.

By the way, musically speaking, we had to sing and we had to play an instrument. We played instruments instead of having earphones and an iPad. And now that I'm fifty-five years old, it is clear that these things helped me a lot in understanding music from another perspective, from the pure way I would say.

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