

Musikfest 4: Expressions of Hope

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In recent years Andris Nelsons has appeared on the stage of the Philharmonie leading the Berlin Philharmonic, the Vienna Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, for whom he has served as chief conductor for close to a decade; at this year's Musikfest the Berlin audience had the opportunity to hear him conduct the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, where he has been musical director since 2018. For their appearance, the orchestra presented a programme of stark contrasts in which the quiet anguish of Shostakovich's *Chamber Symphony* and the cataclysmic force of Sofia Gubaidulina's *Der Zorn Gottes* were held in fine balance by unshakable optimism of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*. If the selection was diverse in both its moods and its chronological range – from the early nineteenth century to the current half-decade – the evening was unified by the high quality of the performances.

Shostakovich's *Chamber Symphony* is, in fact, his *Eighth* string quartet in an arrangement for string orchestra prepared by Rudolf Barshai in 1974. Although there is a twentieth-century tradition of reworking string quartets for larger forces – Beethoven's op. 131 and *Große Fuge* have both been known to feature in orchestral programmes – one may question the need for such transpositions: while there is unquestionable value in making a chamber work available to a wider audience – would *Verklärte Nacht* be as well-known if it existed only in its sextet version? – the gain in textural breadth and hall-filling volume often comes at the expense of the interplay of line and immediacy of sound that only four instruments in a smaller room can achieve.

If Shostakovich's quartets seem inseparable from the intimacy of their original format, Mr Nelsons offered an especially strong case for the merits of an orchestral version. Although he made no attempt to tone down the opulence of the Gewandhaus strings – the first full-orchestra statement of the DSCH motif bloomed with a dark beauty – he acknowledged that a fuller sound allowed for a slower pace than anything a quartet might dare; the first movement moved forward with such exacting patience that it became almost hypnotic, lulling into a trance even those who knew the violence to come. When that violence did

Andris Nelsons
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Berlin, viernes, 9 de septiembre de 2022.
Philharmonie.
Shostakovich: *Chamber Symphony* in C minor, op. 110a. Gubaidulina: *Der Zorn Gottes*. Beethoven: *Symphony No. 7 in A*, op. 92. Gewandhausorchester Leipzig. Andris Nelsons, conductor. Musikfest 2022

finally erupt in the second movement the playing was so incisive – and the sound of the ensemble so overwhelmingly vast – that it was able to capture some of the shock of the quartet version.

While Barshai's arrangement is faithful to the original text, it features several inventive touches of its own. In the third movement – which moved with a languid carousel lilt more refined than grotesque – there was a brief, beautiful passage that achieved its effect by reducing the forces to a solo cello and two violins; and the dramatic power of the fourth was heightened by placing full-orchestra declamations of the recurring three note phrase against the drone of a single, softly-played violin. The orchestration also retained the cumulative effect of the piece: the final movement returned to the deliberate pace and intensely concentrated sound of the opening, and when the DSCH motif returned it sounded wearied but not yet defeated.

If the Chamber Symphony is a work of quiet determination in the face of despair, Sofia Gubaidulina's *Der Zorn Gottes (The Wrath of God)* was closer to a sustained cry of existential doubt. It is a recent work, which had its premiere in 2020 and has already been recorded – by Mr Nelsons the Vienna Philharmonic – for a CD released earlier this year; this evening marked its first performance in Germany. Despite its apocalyptic title it is an elusive and enigmatic work, a dense, metaphysical tone-poem with an undisguised profundity beneath its frequent eruptions of brass and percussion.

It was the low brass – two tubas and four trombones, with some help from the four Wagner tubas in the horn section – that dominated the work: the ominous figure that opened the piece recurred in various guises throughout (accompanied, at one point, by vast waves of gong). Other passages, however, featured a higher-lying palette: violins and clarinets playing at the upper end of their range or the twinkling of glockenspiel and triangle. The combative coexistence of treble and bass, often without the mediating presence of a strong middle register, gave the piece much of its tension and disorienting power. Even the quietest, most meditative passages felt part of a greater struggle. Mr Nelsons, who had extracted emotional turmoil from the Shostakovich through painstaking restraint, approached *Der Zorn Gottes* with far greater urgency, keeping the intensity at consistently high levels from which there were few moments of reprieve.

Der Zorn Gottes is dedicated to 'the great Beethoven' and it was therefore fitting that the task of restoring balance to an evening of desolation and spiritual upheaval should fall to Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*, which was given a satisfyingly straightforward reading that was nonetheless able to summon appropriate levels of excitement and grandeur. While Mr Nelsons largely avoided extremes of tempo, idiosyncratic phrasing, and the temptation of placing a personal interpretive stamp on the music, his consistent good judgement, paired with kinetic playing from the orchestra yielded a compelling performance.

Mr Nelsons achieved a highly distinctive orchestral sound by placing a compact brass and woodwind section – consisting of nothing more than the pairs of instruments specified in the score – against a sixty piece string ensemble. On their own, the strings had exactly the luxurious breadth and expansive mid-range that suits Beethoven's symphonies so well, but in the full-orchestra passages they rarely seemed to dominate. Indeed the nominal

imbalance of forces seemed to push the brass and woodwinds towards a more unreserved manner that resulted in unexpectedly vigorous tutti and quieter passages in which the strings provided an elegant bed for the other instruments. If there were a few passages (especially in the third movement) in which absolute clarity seemed threatened, the textural flexibility of the orchestra offered its own sonic rewards.

The opening of the first movement, with its glowing low strings and decisive timpani, was unhurried but never unmotivated, and while the transition to the Vivace was heralded by increasingly animated flute, the subsequent section achieved its forceful splendour more through effervescent rhythms than overdriven tempi. Mr Nelsons treated the second as a slow movement, notching the pace down from Allegretto to a firm Andante and summoning a gravity that, in its most questioning moments seemed a direct call-back to the evening's first half. The pace and mood allowed the orchestra to flourish; the quiet contrapuntal section was played with a delicate exactitude that allowed no voice to go unnoticed, but when the sections came together at the movement's solemn peaks one was struck by the richness of the full ensemble.

The severity of the second movement was banished almost immediately by the joyous opening of the third; if the two Trio sections sounded tentative – not slow enough to be stately, but never quite tapping into the purposeful momentum that drove the Allegretto – the Scherzo sections were filled with energy. The finale, which struck a perfect balance between precision and excitability, was even more highly charged: as it built towards its climax it was the timpani – accompanied by two faithful trumpets – that emerged as the unifying force, underscoring the thunderous exclamations that, in a very different way from *Der Zorn Gottes*, offered a passing glimpse into the wordless mysteries of the human spirit.