

Musikfest 1: The heart's disquiet

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With the end of every summer comes the beginning of a new concert season and, in Berlin, that transition is usually signalled by Musikfest, the three-week series of orchestral and chamber concerts organised by the Berliner Festspiele in collaboration with the Berlin Philharmonic. This year's festival – which will feature appearances from most of the Berlin orchestras as well as guest performances by musicians and ensembles from around the world – opened with an unsurprisingly fine concert from the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Iván Fischer, which paired the troubled idyll of Mahler's *Seventh Symphony* with extracts from Jörg Widmann's *Das heiße Herz*, an orchestral song cycle inspired by the same vein of German romantic verse that haunted so much of Mahler's oeuvre.

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Philharmonie
Berlin. Widmann:
Songs from *Das
heiße Herz*.

Mahler: *Symphony No. 7* in E minor.
Michael Nagy, baritone. Royal
Concertgebouw Orchestra. Iván Fischer,
conductor



For the texts of *Das heiße Herz*, a song cycle written initially for baritone and piano, Mr Widmann turned to *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* – the nineteenth-century compilation of folk poetry that was such a great influence on Mahler's early output – as well as poems by Heinrich Heine, *Wunderhorn* co-editor Clemens Brentano, and Alfred Henschke, who used the pen-name Klabund. Between 2013, when the first version was completed, and 2018, Mr Widmann undertook a full orchestration of the work; perhaps realising that it would be impossible to create an orchestral cycle based on *Wunderhorn*-related texts without drawing direct comparisons to Mahler, Mr Widmann instead embraced the spirit of the late-romantic ensemble, bolstering large brass, woodwind and string sections with piano, celesta and accordion, and giving the percussionists an expanded palette of vibraslap, exotic gongs and other unconventional noisemakers.

If the forces of the work are recognisably Mahlerian, the songs themselves pursued their own intriguing post-romantic – and occasionally post-modern – directions. On this evening baritone Michael Nagy performed five of the cycle's eight songs beginning with 'Der arme Kaspar' (to a text by Klabund), for which Mr Widmann created a captivating nocturnal mood from crystalline masses of high-pitched sounds, a world that bore little resemblance to the poetic nightscapes of late-romanticism. Against a shimmering backdrop of accordion, celesta, and harp arpeggios, vaguely disoriented string passages and icy clusters of muted trumpet wove their way around the quizzical uncertainties voiced by the song's narrator.

The second and third songs – ‘Hab’ ein Ringlein am Finger’ (from *Wunderhorn*) and ‘Das Fräulein stand am Meere’ (by Heine) – were both brief, seemingly over before they’d had a chance to get going, but both added heavy doses of rhythmic drive to Mr Widmann’s meticulously constructed sonic world. ‘Ringlein’ included an unexpected march-like interlude, while the deranged rustic stomp that menaced ‘Fräulein’ suggested a group of Bruegel’s peasants crashing a Viennese waltz party. Both songs also featured Mr Nagy at his most theatrical, veering effortlessly between melodic line and spoken declamation. ‘Kartenspiel’ (*Wunderhorn*), although it ended with a jazzy coda straight from left field, offered a more sustained dramatic expression: the frequent interjections from the higher-lying instruments gave unsettling texture to the song’s sombre mood and Mr Nagy responded with a reading of elegant restraint.

However it was the final song – ‘Einsam will ich untergehn’ to a text by Brentano – that stood as the cycle’s high point, both in its complex dramatic sweep and its subtle deployment of forces. Opening with a disconsolate descending melody, sung unaccompanied, the first appearance of the orchestra created a mood similar to that of the first song, a world of high-pitched sounds that suggested a frozen stillness around the words. But the orchestra, following the example of the melody, soon began a slow downward slide, eventually coming to rest in a place of middle-register uncertainty. An optimistic interlude and an ambiguous ending offered little reassurance, but the warmth of the strings and the lyrical focus of Mr Nagy – who, by this point, had left all theatrical trappings far behind – yielded a moving conclusion to Mr Widmann’s fascinating cycle.

Although Mahler’s *Seventh Symphony* has a reputation of being comparably neglected – it is the interlude of uncertain tranquillity between the existential dread of the *Sixth* and the monumental ecstasies of the *Eighth* – it has been adopted as an opening night centrepiece on several occasions in recent years. Last year it was performed by Kirill Petrenko as the sole work on the Berlin Philharmonic’s season opening programme, and Sir Simon Rattle used it to kick off his final season as chief conductor of the same orchestra in 2016. Yet even for established Mahler specialists the work can be problematic: it is just as easy to understate the drama of the first movement as it is to miss the elusive grace of the two *Nachtmusiks*, and performances that can find a perfect balance between the work’s disparate episodes are remarkably rare.

While Iván Fischer’s reading, favoured brisk, animated tempi, his sense of how the work’s episodes fit together into larger structures made for a performance that was exciting and illuminating in equal measure. The opening section of the first movement was taken at a deliberate pace and there was a subtle accentuation of the lower strings that gave extra weight to the sound, but beneath it all was an unmistakable sense of purpose. If Mr Fischer was willing to heighten the contrast in tempi for dramatic effect, he was nonetheless able to achieve graceful transitions between the alternating *Langsam* and *Allegro* passages that give the first movement its form. When he arrived at the central interlude the pace slowed appropriately, but even among the beautifully languid strings, gentle harps, and eerily calm trumpet calls, there was an underlying disquiet suggesting that everything could change in an instant.

If the first movement was notable for its expansive drama, the second was compact and

tightly wound, played with such motivation that it could almost have passed for a Scherzo. Yet for all its urgency and accentuated rhythms, Mr Fischer maintained a keen sense not only of the movement's alpine flavours – the distant cowbells and shepherd's piping of the oboes were integrated flawlessly into the sonic landscape – but also its capacity for grandeur: the full string attack of the main theme near the end of the movement was especially arresting. In the third movement Mr Fischer balanced the potential weight of the orchestra with an unfailingly light touch. And in the fourth – for which the guitar and mandolin took centre stage, one on either side of Mr Fischer – the energetic pace was offset by a gentle phrasing that gave the movement its own serenity.

The final movement alone seemed less intensely focussed than the rest. Although the brisk pace was still in evidence, there were a handful of passages in which smaller details became lost in the general excitement. The quality of the playing, however, remained high – especially the strings, who lost none of their warmth even in the most driven passages – and Mr Fischer's reading was genial and affectionate to the end. But if the finale was unreservedly triumphant in tone, it was the emotional ambiguities of the earlier movements – and of Mr Widmann's songs – that made the evening so captivating.