

Musikfest 3: Trumpets and Drums

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For the past several years Andris Nelsons has been a regular guest at Musikfest, and two of his recent appearances with the Boston Symphony Orchestra – for whom he has served as chief conductor since 2014 – showcased a great Mahler interpreter at work. Other concerts with different orchestras have demonstrated Mr Nelsons' command of the nineteenth-century Austro-German repertoire, but have revealed him to be an equally persuasive ambassador for new works by living composers. His concert with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at this year's Musikfest was therefore something of a departure: although it did open with a newly composed work by Julia Adolphe, the two remaining pieces – Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and Gershwin's *Concerto in F* for piano and orchestra – seemed unexpected. But if the programme was held together by few common threads – save perhaps for the prominent trumpet and the moments of heavy drumming shared by the three works – the quality of the performances yielded an evening of constant delights.

The opening piece was a recent work by Julia Adolphe – it had its première last summer – with the intriguingly contradictory title *Makeshift Castle*. The same logic of irreconcilable opposites that informed the title also ran through the two parts of the piece itself: the first movement, especially, had passages that maintained a rigorous order even when the different orchestral sections seemed to be pursuing their own highly divergent rhythmic and sonic ends. Against restless percussion and staccato brass the strings offered a kind of calm that was not without its own internal tension; and despite the myriad surface events, which coalesced occasionally into energetic full orchestra passages, there seemed to be a deep presiding slowness beneath it all. These undercurrents came to the fore midway through the movement when the rush of activity gave way to a still moment of high strings and woodwinds; and while the full orchestra soon became involved again, propelling the movement to its climax, it then faded back until only a single dying violin note remained.

If the work drew upon an expanded tonal and timbral palette, it remained both sonically



Andris Nelsons y Jean-Yves Thibaudet © 2023 by Peter Fischli/Lucerne Festival
Berlin, martes, 5 de septiembre de 2023. Philharmonie Berlin. Julia Adolphe: Makeshift Castle. George Gershwin: Concerto in F. Igor Stravinsky: *Petrushka*. Jean-Yves Thibaudet, piano. Boston Symphony Orchestra. Andris Nelsons, conductor

and structurally approachable. The second movement, after a frenetic opening of percussion and piano, returned to the slowness of the first, but at a much higher level of concentration. A passage for strings, horns and muted trumpets built to an extraordinary peak, then settled into a quieter section that sounded almost Sibelian in its elemental focus before coming to rest in a manner that mirrored the end of the first movement, with a lone clarinet note that faded slowly into silence.

Nearly a century after its composition, Gershwin's *Concerto in F* for piano and orchestra – the evening's second piece – remains a curious work, steeped equally in the jazzy rhythms of New York night clubs, the spirited optimism of vernacular Americana and the perceived opulence of mainstream concertos such as those of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. Even more than *Rhapsody in Blue* – written the year before and directly responsible for the *Concerto's* commission – it is a work that refuses to acknowledge the boundaries between pop and classical; yet despite its calculated goal of placing popular idioms in a work that might be accepted by the orchestral establishment, it maintains an ironic distance from its inspirations. It's most conspicuously classical moments are edged with knowing exaggeration, yet even the most vaudevillian sections of the piano part have a virtuoso focus that give lie to their apparently casual nature. If the writing is never parodic, it is nonetheless a work that demands to be played directly to the audience with a smile and wink.

The orchestra, with Jean-Yves Thibaudet at the piano, took almost exactly the opposite approach: with poker face and solemn concentration, the ensemble dug into the work as though it were the D minor of Brahms; and yet their scrupulous performance served only to highlight the work's vivacity and genial good nature. Between Mr Thibaudet's unflappable poise and the orchestra's ability to shuttle convincingly between the dance hall and the concert hall, the performance captured both the work's gregarious charms and its precarious balance of styles.

After an introductory flurry of drumming and jazzy brass, Mr Thibaudet's entrance seemed almost tentative, as though easing himself into the groove. While some of the earlier passages had an amiable quality that could have passed for an American cousin of Poulenc's solo-piano works, as the piano writing grew more dense Mr Thibaudet responded with heightened virtuosity. But if the piano spent the first part of the movement trying to drag the orchestra away from the vernacular, as soon as the strings displayed the first hint of classicism, the piano seemed to dive back into the crowd-pleasing flourishes of a Broadway revue (albeit one played by Mr Thibaudet without any trace of pandering). If the movement achieved its creative tension from its series of stylistic dialogues between piano and orchestra, the two came together for a conclusion so boisterous that it was greeted by sustained applause from the audience.

The second movement, however, was possibly the evening's high point. It opened with a bluesy trumpet solo – and a touch of defiantly un-bluesy oboe – before settling into an elegant piano-led passage cut from a similar cloth to that of *Rhapsody in Blue*. A delicately played fast-paced section led into a mini-cadenza that came across as a subtle subversion of the romantic concerto, too affectionate to be ironic, but too witty to be entirely serious. The energetic final movement – propelled on this evening by infectiously rhythmic orchestral playing – contains some of the work's least overtly classical piano passages, and while Mr

Thibaudet stopped well short of showboating, his energy and enthusiasm nonetheless guided the *Concerto* to a sparkling conclusion.

Petrushka, for many the most familiar work on the programme, seemed also the evening's most carefully measured performance; yet if it favoured incisive refinement over carnival bawdiness, the quality of the playing and Mr Nelsons' feel for the dramatic potential in each of the episodes yielded a balanced and consistently engaging tour of Stravinsky's tragicomic ballet. The strings got the first tableau off to a dazzling start, and while Mr Nelsons tended to favour heavier rhythms and generally unhurried tempi, his reading gave unfailing precedence to clarity of texture and immediacy of detail. Indeed, the piece – even more than Gershwin's *Concerto* – offered a showcase for the orchestra's soloists, from the beautiful solo-flute passage in the second tableau to the solo trumpet dance of the third. If the first three parts did little to downplay the essentially episodic construction of the work, the concluding tableau was remarkably cohesive, moving effortlessly between the lively antics of the Shrovetide fair – signalled by glowing horns, excitable woodwinds and shimmering strings – and *Petrushka*'s inevitable meeting with his own strange fate.