

Rational romantics

JESSE SIMON

The area around Potsdamer Platz was unnaturally crowded for a Thursday, but not everyone was there for the first night of Berlinale. The foyer of the Philharmonie was also busy in anticipation of a concert featuring the Berlin Philharmonic, their artist-in-residence Lisa Batiashvili, and their chief conductor Kirill Petrenko. Although the programme promised a fairly traditional overture-concerto-symphony structure, the choice of pieces – which included Szymanowski's first *Violin Concerto* and Strauss' *Symphonia domestica* – and the quality of the performances yielded a concert that balanced obvious thrills with subtler pleasures.

Lisa Batiashvili
© 2020 by Sammy
Hart/DG

**Berlin, jueves, 15
de febrero de
2024.**

Philharmonie
Berlin. Brahms:
Tragic Overture,
op. 81. Szymanowski: *Violin Concerto No.
1*, op. 35. Strauss: *Symphonia domestica*,
op. 53. Lisa Batiashvili, violin. Berlin
Philharmonic. Kirill Petrenko, conductor



The opening piece was Brahms' *Tragic Overture*, but it was clear from the decisive vigour of the first two chords that Mr Petrenko had little intention of taking the work's title at face value: what followed was high on tension and remarkably free of anguish. Mr Petrenko is not known for over-indulgence in works from the romantic era, and his streamlined approach brought out the symphonic thrust of the overture with a refreshing lack of pretence. While the quieter sections were given an undercurrent of nervous energy from the propulsive playing of the strings, the even tempi in the final section offered a bracing conclusion that remained wholly free of excess.

In recent decades Szymanowski's two violin concerti have received ever-increasing support from a new generation of violinists looking beyond the repertoire of established classics. The first concerto in particular is a captivating work, offering scope for displays of technical skill while inhabiting its own elusive world, and on this evening it found an especially persuasive champion in Lisa Batiashvili, whose clarity of tone and nuanced understanding of the work's varied moods were placed in the service of a mesmerising performance.

One couldn't describe the first entry of the violin – which followed a shimmering introduction from the orchestra – as tentative, but it had a compellingly spectral quality: Ms Batiashvili was able to give the high-lying passages of the opening section extraordinary definition without dispelling the trance-like mood that placed the violin part at a distance from the subtle animations of the orchestra. The almost hypnotic tranquillity made the

sudden explosion of frenetic playing that followed seem all the more arresting; and when the violin returned after the orchestra had calmed down, the ethereal tone of the first section had been replaced by playing that was forceful, direct and endlessly lyrical.

Another brief orchestral surge led into the concerto's central Scherzando section in which Ms Batiashvili traded lyricism for a tightly focussed (and often technically dazzling) delivery that positioned the violin as the lone force of stability keeping the woozy abandon of the orchestra in check. Of course Mr Petrenko ensured that there was no danger of orchestral excess: if the climactic full-ensemble statements could sound a touch muddy, he made sure that the work's textural details and impressionistic flourishes supported rather than overwhelmed the solo part. When the cadenza arrived, Ms Batiashvili provided an elegant summation of the violin part's many moods, from ghostly translucence to carefully-controlled bravura, before settling on a tone of luminous confidence that brought the piece to its quiet resolution.

If there is a single composer who occupies a central position within Mr Petrenko's personal repertoire, it may well be Richard Strauss. Both *Don Juan* and *Tod und Verklärung* played a prominent part in his first concert as chief conductor back in 2018, and subsequent programmes have made room for both the tone poems and concert performances of certain operas (including a memorable *Die Frau ohne Schatten* last year; *Elektra* is scheduled for this April). Even before he had started his tenure with the Berlin Philharmonic, Mr Petrenko and the Bayerisches Staatsorchester impressed Berlin audiences with an explosive guest performance of the less-frequently-performed *Symphonia domestica*, and it was the same piece that formed the second half of the evening's programme.

Yet if Mr Petrenko has an obvious affinity with Strauss, his approach often yields unconventional results. Strauss' music has beguiled audiences throughout the past century in part because it has attracted interpreters who are willing to indulge its extravagances, to highlight the ever-present ironies while layering on a little extra lustre. Mr Petrenko, on the other hand, has little time for conductorly intervention: his performances, while free of excess gloss, admit no burnishing of themes or underlining of the illustrative effects in which Strauss himself took so much delight.

The advantages and limitations of Mr Petrenko's approach were on full display in the course of a *Symphonia domestica* that shuttled rapidly between passages of seeming indifference and moments of euphoric rush. The energetic opening, which made no attempts to downplay the subtle cross-currents in the strings, set the tone for the performance: this was going to be a reading in which the chaos of family life seemed destined to win out over domestic bliss. Yet while Mr Petrenko could in no way be accused of romanticising, it was often the moments of quiet beauty that emerged as the most illuminating.

The performance was full of elegant playing – most notably the solo oboe and solo flute – as well as some playing in which elegance was thrust aside to great effect (the braying of trumpets and horns in the scherzo seemed distantly related to the ill-fated sheep in *Don Quixote*). But if there were no obvious weaknesses within the orchestral sections, the climactic full-orchestra passages often sounded large and formless, desperate for an

intervening hand to bestow definition and balance; this was especially true in the finale, which featured several moments that veered close to barely-controlled chaos.

Yet the occasional frustrations in Mr Petrenko's reading must be measured against the undeniable – almost irrational – levels of excitement he is able to bring to Strauss. For all that one may have longed for greater finesse or cultivation, there was a cumulative effect in Mr Petrenko's ceaseless energy that proved infectious. Szymanowski's *Violin Concerto* may have received the more rewarding performance, but the *Symphonia domestica* captivated the audience at an intuitive level.