

## *Musikfest 1: The American Tour*

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The end of August in Berlin means two things: a sudden, unbearable heatwave, and the beginning of Musikfest, the annual three-week festival of local and visiting orchestras and musicians organised by the Berliner Festspiele.

And while the late-summer heat was certainly out in full force, visitors were able to find appropriately tropical refreshment at the impromptu Caipirinha stand which had been set up outside the Philharmonie in anticipation of the opening night concert from the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Thierry Fischer.

The programme of Musikfest – which celebrates its twentieth anniversary this year – is frequently built on a core of classic repertoire: in the coming weeks, works by Beethoven, Schumann, Bruckner and Mahler will all be making prominent appearances. Yet its most fascinating concerts are often the ones which offer audiences the opportunity to experience rarely-performed works from twentieth-century masters alongside newer works by living composers; and to get the festival started, the São Paulo Symphony, making an extremely rare appearance in Berlin, came armed with precisely the kind of adventurous programme that makes Musikfest so rewarding, in this case a celebration of twentieth-century music from the Americas.

The evening opened with *Central Park in the Dark*, Charles [Ives](#)' evocation of a New York City that had long ceased to exist even by the time the first version was composed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Although the piece culminates in a delightful cacophony of popular song fragments, the nocturnal ambiance of its long opening section provided an ideal showcase for the São Paulo strings, whose gauzy playing sustained a mood of profound calm.

The ghostly clarinet and soft pianos served only to heighten the presiding stillness, and when the full-ensemble exertions of the climax had died away, it was the strings again who brought the piece to its hushed conclusion.

The programme's most intriguing piece was also arguably its least well-known. Although



Simovic and São Paulo Symphony Orchestra © 2024 by Fabian Schellhorn  
**Berlin, sábado, 24 de agosto de 2024.**  
Philharmonie Berlin. Ives: *Central Park in the Dark*. Ginastera: *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* op. 30. Villa-Lobos: *Uirapurú*. Varèse: *Amériques*. Roman Simovic, violin. São Paulo Symphony Orchestra. Thierry Fischer, conductor. Musikfest 2024

Alberto [Ginastera](#) was by no means an obscure figure in his day – indeed, he was regarded as one of the key South American composers of the mid-twentieth century – his works have become increasingly difficult to hear.

The *Violin Concerto*, which enjoyed a high-profile première under Leonard [Bernstein](#) in 1963, has received remarkably few commercial recordings in the decades since and remains a rarity in the concert hall. It is nonetheless a compelling work with its own distinctive voice; and on this evening, the intensely expressive performance from Roman [Simovic](#) and the committed support of the orchestra suggested a work that is ready for wider rediscovery.

The unconventional opening – a long virtuoso passage for unaccompanied violin featuring all manner of extended technique – was enough to get the audience hooked. When the orchestra finally made their entry the sound was distinctly mid-century modern, but with a rhythmic verve that set it subtly apart from the formality of the period. I

Indeed the scores nods to the prevalent modernism of the 1950s and 60s, while successfully executed, were often less intriguing than the sections where the piece went off in its own unexpected directions. Certainly the first movement rarely settled into one mode for very long, alternating passages of astringent lyricism – including some delicate trills and broken chords from Mr Simovic – with orchestral volatility.

The slow second movement, which reduced the scoring from large orchestra to 22 solo instruments, was perhaps the most fascinating and certainly the most rewarding; despite a handful of controlled surges it maintained a carefully-wrought mood of ambiguous tranquillity, albeit one far removed from Ives' *Central Park*.

By contrast, the brief but enthralling final movement, propelled by mallet percussion, shakers and even some hand drumming, had a restless energy that never subsided, and it was the excitability of the solo violin and the agitation of the orchestra that drove the piece to its conclusion.

For Mr Simovic, however, the exertions of Ginastera's finale were only a warm up for an unexpectedly generous encore performance of [Ysaÿe](#)'s *Violin Sonata No. 3*. With emphatic tone and supreme confidence, Mr Simovic navigated its considerable technical demands while delivering a reading that, for all its flights of lyricism, remained rooted in an unerring sense of the work's rhythmic undercurrents.

The evening's second half began with another relative rarity, *Uirapurú*, a symphonic poem by Heitor [Villa-Lobos](#) that was first performed in 1935. Although hints of Debussy could be heard in the lush, impressionistic opening and in the beautifully played solo-flute passages that wove their way through the piece, it was the influence of Stravinsky that was most audible, especially in the rhythmically vigorous parts of the first half.

Although the work itself seemed somewhat diffuse, more a collection of brilliant moments than a unified statement, Mr [Fischer](#)'s reading was highly charged and the orchestra never sounded less than wholly invested in the varied textures of the score.

During the brief pause following *Uirapurú*, the orchestra's percussion section swelled to twice its previous size – more than a dozen in total – in preparation for the evening's final work, Edgard Varèse's *Amériques*.

Although [Varèse](#) was born (and began his career) in Paris – making him the sole European on the programme – his musical identity was very much shaped by his life in New York City; and if the Ives piece that opened the evening offers a glimpse of that city's distant pastoral past, *Amériques* absorbs all the noises and unpredictability of the twentieth-century metropolis and distills them into something relentless, cathartic and wholly unforgettable.

The past century has done little to diminish the brute force of Varèse's score, nor did Mr Fischer in his reading make any attempts to soften its aggression. Instead he focussed on finding a balance between the incessant and the random, keeping a tight rein on the work's rhythmic outbursts, but allowing the woodblock snaps and siren calls to give the work a necessary edge of chaos.

When, in the final five minutes, the orchestra locked into wave after wave of pummelling crescendo it was as unnerving and energising as one could hope ... indeed a few people even walked out. Those who remained, however, greeted the performance – and the evening as a whole – with the fulsome applause it so clearly deserved.