

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

CONDUCTOR

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At Tanglewood, a tradition expanded with more Beethoven

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff / August 25, 2008

LENOX - The Boston Symphony Orchestra's Tanglewood season concluded this weekend with a blast of Beethoven - and nothing but - sustained over three concerts, and culminating in yesterday's traditional season-ending performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

After a summer with no shortage of monsoon-like rains and fierce electrical storms, Mother Nature made amends with copious sunshine and perfect temperatures that helped draw large crowds of picnickers to the lawn throughout the weekend.

Musically speaking, if the season opened with a hugely ambitious artistic and logistical feat - a complete performance of Berlioz's epic opera "The Trojans," and an exhilarating one at that - it ended by taking safe harbor in the comfort of the familiar. The weekend's three concerts contained all three of the best-known Beethoven symphonies - the "Eroica," the Fifth, and of course the Ninth - dispensed one per program.

This kind of programming comes with its own risks too, less for the box office (in the short term) than for the artists tasked with breathing fresh life into overly familiar masterpieces. **Fortunately, the BSO had on hand the eminent German maestro Christoph von Dohnanyi who at 78 years old still has a way of conducting these works with a brilliant clarity and penetration of vision that, at its best, can convey an ongoing sense of discovery, apparently no matter how many times he's led them before.**

One particularly appreciated this in yesterday's performance of the Ninth Symphony, a piece that had been given the kind of rough-hewn and uninspired reading last summer (with the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra under Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos) that made one wonder if it were not time for a break from this season-closing tradition altogether. **Under Dohnanyi's baton however, the work came alive in a tightly focused, richly textured performance that was expressively powerful yet shorn of all sentimentality.**

In many ways, the interpretation built up from the plethora of tiny details. From the first movement on, you could hear Dohnanyi tweaking familiar balances, bringing forward certain chords in the woodwinds that typically sound recessed, or drawing out strongly defined inner voices from the strings. At other moments he seemed intent on pulling back the curtain of classical refinement to provide a glimpse of the wildness that still lurks deep inside this music, despite our best attempts at domestication.

The finale was clear and cogent, expansive in all of its choral glory yet tightly honed. The orchestra proved keenly responsive to Dohnanyi's ideas and performed to its usual high standards. For its part, the Tanglewood Festival Chorus sang with impressive heft and clarity, outdoing its fine performance in Friday's Mass in C. The soloists - Christiane Oelze, Lilli Paasikivi, Joseph Kaiser, and Hanno Müller-Brachman - made strong contributions. The applause went on and on.

Dohnanyi's "Eroica" the previous night accomplished a similar feat of opening up fresh vistas onto familiar terrain, and the Second Symphony, played on the same program, came off as refreshingly crisp and clear, with the strings really digging in for the invigorating finale. Friday night, Fruhbeck led a spacious account of Beethoven's Mass, a touching work from 1807 that is too often overshadowed by the magisterial "Missa Solemnis." (The vocal soloists Oelze and Müller-Brachman were joined by Kristine Jepson and Richard Croft.) It was paired with the Fifth Symphony in a performance that seemed to have less new to say. It can't be easy with a work so ubiquitous.

Meanwhile, the informal reports on James Levine's recovery are promising. He is scheduled to open the orchestra's Symphony Hall season on Sept. 24.

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