CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI
CONDUCTOR

THE BOSTON GLOBE
MUSIC REVIEW

Guest conductor concocts a pleasing mix of contemporary and classic

By David Weininger
Correspondent | October 20, 2007

Pianist Lars Vogt performs with the BSO Thursday night, conducted by Christoph von Dohnányi. (Michael Lutch)

Christoph von Dohnányi's program for his latest guest conducting stint with the Boston Symphony Orchestra fits a template he's established over several visits: a strong dose of modern or contemporary music followed by better-known fare from the 19th century. Both sides of the plan usually benefit from the juxtaposition, as well as from Dohnányi's authoritative, no-nonsense conducting style.

That was certainly the case Thursday night. The concert led off with Witold Lutoslawski's bracing "Musique funèbre" for strings. Written in the mid-1950s, the piece is dedicated to Bartok, whose "Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta" it resembles in both sound and shape. It begins with two solo cellos in somber contrapuntal dialogue. Gradually the other instruments steal in, their lines slithering ominously about one another. Though Lutoslawski wrote the piece using 12-tone techniques, he wields them in such a way as to make large stretches of the piece sound almost tonal.

After a development section of growing intensity, the work reaches a furious climax of repeated dissonant chords. As the music subsides, the opening material is recalled as a distant memory. Finally the texture thins out again, this time to a solo cello, who reminiscences alone. Dohnányi made admirable sense of this complex score and kept the thicket of lines lucid and precise.

The rest of the evening was given over to Beethoven. The German pianist Lars Vogt was the soloist in the Third Piano Concerto. He and Dohnányi took a somewhat cool, Apollonian view of the piece, emphasizing elegance and proportion where others have seen the first evidence of Beethoven's heroic intensity.

Vogt's playing was brisk and graceful, full of even, sensitive phrasing and pinpoint sonic clarity. His musicianship is steeped in a poeticism that's tempered by rigor. Dohnányi proved to be a highly sympathetic collaborator, maintaining careful balances between soloist and orchestra that allowed unfamiliar details to shine through. The slow movement had a wonderful sense of otherworldly interiority, and the finale captured a light, dancing feel.

After intermission Dohnányi led the Fifth Symphony. Rather than trying to make this warhorse sound new and different, he offered a compact, driven performance that paid careful attention to the piece's overall structure without sacrificing power or excitement. The first movement's famous mottos sounded like one complete phrase rather than two choppy ones, and the rest of the movement followed with an inexorable sense of motion. The finale seemed less like a sudden eruption of force than the logical culmination of what had come before. The orchestra sounded terrific, and a few doubled winds gave the sound some extra muscle.

There were no new revelations about Beethoven here; just a potent reminder of why we return to this iconic piece so frequently. More often than not, that is enough.