

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

CONDUCTOR

Music Review | NDR Symphony Orchestra

Flourishes of Hamburg, With Muscle and Finesse

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The tradition of solid, efficient and often finely polished radio orchestras that still thrives in Europe never quite took off in the United States, despite Toscanini's efforts in that direction with the NBC Symphony. That may explain why there were so many empty seats at [Carnegie Hall](#) when one of the better German radio ensembles, the NDR Symphony Orchestra, of Hamburg, played high-energy concerts on Monday and Tuesday evenings, with Christoph von Dohnanyi on the podium.

This orchestra may not have the cachet or the streamlined sumptuousness of the Vienna or Berlin Philharmonics, but it has an estimable history. Mr. Dohnanyi has led it only since 2004, and among his predecessors were Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt (largely forgotten now, but a favorite of record collectors in the 1960s), Klaus Tennstedt, Günter Wand and [Christoph Eschenbach](#). History aside, its Brahms First, on Monday, and its Mahler First, on Tuesday, crackled with the kind of enlivening visceral energy and sheer volume that are too rarely encountered in the rarefied precincts of symphony concerts.

Mr. Dohnanyi's programs offered works by five composers with ties to Hamburg. Two, Mendelssohn and Brahms, were born there. Two others, Schnittke and Ligeti, lived and worked in Hamburg in their late years, and the last, Mahler, was principal conductor of the Hamburg Opera in the 1890s.

Mr. Dohnanyi and the orchestra seem to have a good chemistry, and one of the signatures of their collaboration is the orchestra's willingness to produce the enormous breadth in dynamics that Mr. Dohnanyi regularly calls for. That effect was evident in the opening work on Monday, Mendelssohn's modest "Ruy Blas" Overture. The portentous, full-ensemble writing was given a beefy sound and an extra measure of dramatic urgency, and the string passages between those sections were played with extraordinary delicacy.

The Mahler and Brahms symphonies, naturally, were more fully steeped in this effect, and by the end of the second program it had come to seem almost a quirk. But there was no denying that the orchestra was at its best and most polished when it played at extremes, either ethereal pianissimos or hall-shaking fortissimos. One moment toward the end of the Mahler brought back an aspect of Carnegie's sound that has been largely absent since the 1987 renovation: You could feel the energy of the basses, percussion and low brass through the floor.

On the other hand, one of the most striking performances of the visit was Ligeti's "Lontano" (1967), an almost Minimalist work in its paucity of movement.

Both programs included violin concertos, with Vadim Repin as the soloist. On Monday Mr. Repin offered Schnittke's Violin Concerto No. 4 (1984), a dark-hued, ruminative work composed for Gidon Kremer. Its orchestral writing is rich in Schnittke's idiosyncrasies. A harpsichord interposes patches of Baroque figuration amid the free dissonance; murky textures give way to sparkling patches of percussion and celesta. Against all this, Mr. Repin was earnest and intently focused at first, but he loosened up quickly and produced an agile, sometimes sharp-edged and often beautifully soaring performance.

He had an easier task on Tuesday, when he gave a thoughtfully phrased, sweet-toned account of the Mendelssohn Concerto.

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