

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

CONDUCTOR

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Spinning webs, skipping applause, grafting centuries

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | April 6, 2007

The most magical few seconds of last night's BSO concert in Symphony Hall were the ones in which applause was jettisoned in favor of absolute silence. It was not some gesture of audience protest but rather a decision by guest conductor Christoph von Dohnanyi to seamlessly link the first two works on the program -- Gyorgy Ligeti's "Atmosphères" and the Prelude to Act I of Wagner's "Lohengrin" -- with only the briefest of pauses between them, as if they were not masterpieces separated by more than a century but simply distinct movements in one vast cosmic symphony.

Of course, the silent bridge worked as well as it did because these two pieces make an inspired pairing. Written in 1961, "Atmosphères" was one of Ligeti's early pathbreaking works, later inscribed in popular consciousness thanks to Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey." The piece begins with enormous yet quiet chords, the sound of many octaves being pulverized into a sonic mist that slowly rolls off the stage like a fog.

It is a work full of exquisite effects, one that explores the surface textures of sound in its rawest form. **Dohnanyi led a taut and effective performance**, though the work's wildest moment felt slightly blunted, when the music plunges from the piercing woodwind-violin stratosphere into the deepest depths of the double bass range. Last night, the orchestral freefall was gentler than it could have been.

Played on its own, "Atmosphères" would make an entrancing opener to any concert but its close proximity to the Wagner made Ligeti's fearless embrace of new landscapes of orchestral sound seem like a gesture that was itself deeply grounded in music history. Last night, just as Ligeti's final bars of music drifted off into the astral wind, the ear was met with the opening strands of "Lohengrin," Wagner's own 19th-century version of a vast orchestral web, spun out by weightless strings. In other words, the two pieces dovetailed to remarkable effect. As for the Wagner performance itself, other conductors luxuriate more deeply in the sheer sonic otherworldliness of this music, but **Dohnanyi's account had a clarity and integrity of its own.**

With such a carefully chosen pairing to open the concert, it seemed downright odd that Dohnanyi closed the night with Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, as if he had grown tired midway through programming this concert and decided to simply toss a dart at a long list of his repertoire. That said, he led a performance of rigor and dynamism, with some delightfully warm string playing throughout and some eloquent woodwind solos that made the second movement a particular pleasure.

At the heart of the concert was Bartok's Second Piano Concerto, a punishingly difficult work that the French pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard dispatched with muscular virtuosity and crackling intelligence. Aimard is an immensely resourceful musician and he seemed to have a natural feel for what the music needed, be it coiled energy for its cutting counterpoint, or a slightly veiled, opal tone for its moments of adagio repose. The pianist returns to Tanglewood this summer; his solo recital in particular should be worth the trip.

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