# CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI
## CONDUCTOR

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**Sounds of the Wilderness in the Deep Still of Night**

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I am probably not the first to attach the term "black hole" to Harrison Birtwistle's music. Not much light escapes from pieces like "Night's Black Bird," a 12-minute essay in darkness and inertia played by the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall on Wednesday, with Christoph von Dohnanyi conducting.

The intermittent flashes of brightness, when they come, come suddenly, like shafts shooting through gaps in a prevailing cloud cover. Piccolos and high clarinets offer shrill birdcalls, indicating life after dark in the branches of Mr. Birtwistle's nightscapes. High brass has a lightninglike effect.

But light is not the idea here. Light serves as a fragmented background to Mr. Birtwistle's carefully arranged layers of baritonal groans and howls. The music goes nowhere, transforming itself into different shapes and sizes from a fixed position. For all its apparent threats, "Night's Black Bird" is very welcoming to the listener. Doom-ridden on the surface, it is actually the work of a hedonist, a man whose love of orchestral sound just happens to exist more at the bottom of its range than its top.

The rest of the evening was old news, retold to good effect. It was hardly necessary to remind Philharmonic listeners what a wonderful piece the Beethoven Fifth Symphony is, but there it was after intermission, played with earnestness and skill and coherently organized by a conductor who knows this music even better than we do.

Nikolaj Znaider, with the build and the bearing of a linebacker, was the soloist in Sibelius's Violin Concerto. He is a good musician with an approach that some might call "spacious": a tendency to let phrases unfold slowly. This is terribly difficult music for the player, and Mr. Znaider is up to it — just. There are a few violinists before the public who can make the fierce finale sound easy. Mr. Znaider made it sound hard.

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