

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

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THE MIAMI HERALD

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

Philharmonia soars with Mahler

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Posted on Fri, May. 02, 2008

The Philharmonia Orchestra is a rare symphonic hybrid, an English orchestra with a firm Austro-German tradition. Founded in 1945 by the legendary producer Walter Legge as a studio ensemble, the Philharmonia quickly established a strong reputation with several magnificent recordings and live concerts by postwar luminaries Otto Klemperer and Herbert von Karajan.

That Philharmonia tradition has continued over the last half-century and, led by the celebrated Christoph von Dohnanyi, the orchestra made a rare appearance in Miami on Thursday night for the first of two concerts to close the Concert Association of Florida's season.

The event at the Arsht Center's Knight Concert Hall also marked the belated debut of the celebrated Dohnanyi, who has served as principal conductor of the Philharmonia since 1997 and, previously, music director of the Cleveland Orchestra for nearly two decades.

Two cornerstones of the Austro-German repertoire -- Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony and Mahler's Symphony No. 1 -- made worthy vehicles for the storied English orchestra. Even among the musical riches of London with several major orchestras, the Philharmonia revealed itself as a very impressive ensemble, with warm-toned strings, characterful winds and mostly brilliant brass, trumpets in particular.

The orchestra's fine qualities were immediately made apparent in Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony (No. 4). Dohnanyi's approach was firmly in the Central European tradition, neither inflating the music to Late-Romantic proportions nor condescending to it. A light graceful expression prevailed, which showed off the nimble, elegant strings particularly well. Superbly played as it was, there were moments when the performances crossed from understated to a bit stolid, with a rather dull pilgrimage procession in the Andante and outer movements that could have used more vitality and exuberance.

One could hardly say the same about the ensuing, quite **extraordinary performance of Mahler's Symphony No. 1 that came after intermission. This beloved war horse is played so often for souped-up volume and easy surface effect that one can forget what a deeply wrought masterpiece this is.**

Dohnanyi's attention to detail, his transparency and scrupulous balancing were repeatedly made manifest: the spacious drawing out of spring awakening at the opening with notably bucolic and natural avian contributions from the woodwinds, or the idiomatic Viennese lilt in the trio of the Landler.

Throughout, Dohnanyi avoided the easy effect even in the eerie theatricality of the third movement, with a hushed, haunting double-bass solo and a rather non-ethnic take on what Leonard Bernstein called the "Jewish wedding music."

There was no lack of power or impact as in the first movement's climax or the seismic upheaval of the turbulent finale's opening bars. **Rarely will one hear such an organic, seamless performance or string phrases played with such honeyed tenderness and nostalgic ache as with the lyrical reminiscences in the final section.**

The Philharmonia rose to the rousing coda with ample punch and brilliance from the resplendent trumpets and trombones, the eight horns standing for the final victorious blast as Mahler wanted. (Though considering the playing of one member of the horn section throughout the evening, he probably should have remained seated.)

Still, a rousing finale to the Concert Association season. You have one more chance to hear this justly celebrated conductor and orchestra in Boca Raton on Friday. Don't let it pass by.

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