

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

CONDUCTOR

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Giving a Guest Conductor Reasons to Feel Right at Home

By STEVE SMITH

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Did the conductor Christoph von Dohnanyi smile when he first faced the New York Philharmonic before his latest guest appearance with the orchestra this week? He must surely have nodded in recognition of certain parallels. The Philharmonic players have been reseated since Alan Gilbert's arrival as music director. As always, the first violins sit to the left of the podium. But the second violins now sit to the conductor's right, with cellos and violas in between, and double basses arrayed to the rear left.

The configuration is one that Mr. Dohnanyi himself adopted as the music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, where he served with distinction from 1984 to 2002, and Mr. Gilbert was an assistant conductor at that orchestra in the mid-1990s. The arrangement, Mr. Gilbert has said, offers increased clarity and balance, qualities that Mr. Dohnanyi's ensemble possessed in abundance.

There is another parallel: Mr. Dohnanyi and Mr. Gilbert each succeeded Lorin Maazel, each inheriting an orchestra that had been technically well maintained. But for Mr. Dohnanyi, now the chief conductor of the NDR Symphony Orchestra in Hamburg, the time for confronting ghosts is past. When he took the podium at Avery Fisher Hall on Thursday evening, his role was that of the distinguished guest; his repertory, music by Mozart and Bruckner, with which he has long been associated.

Leading a lean ensemble of a few dozen strings, two oboes and two horns, Mr. Dohnanyi opened with a crisp, lively performance of Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante in E flat (K. 364/320d) with the concertmaster Glenn Dicterow and the principal violist Cynthia Phelps as the soloists. Mr. Dicterow played with generous vibrato and a touch of old-school schmaltz, which Ms. Phelps countered with a warm dignity. The orchestra's playing was pert and lively in the outer movements; the central Andante was saturated with a mesmerizing glow.

With the orchestra at full muster, Mr. Dohnanyi offered an account of Bruckner's Symphony No. 4 ("Romantic"), notable for its keenly illuminated architecture, showing a sovereign control in pacing and transitions. Philip Myers, the principal horn player, was especially radiant in the opening movement, sounding out over a hushed murmur. The strings played with a compelling warmth and serenity; the brass section blazed magnificently in its grandiose chorales throughout.

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