

# CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

## CONDUCTOR

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### Philharmonia/Von Dohnányi

St David's Hall, Cardiff

★★★★★

**Rian Evans**

[guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), Tuesday 20 October 2009

Christoph von Dohnányi was 80 in September, and he is celebrating with the Philharmonia – which, last season, made him honorary conductor for life. A quaint title, perhaps, but not without resonance for a man whose family history is so remarkable. His father, Hans, and his mother's brother, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were executed by the Nazis in 1945 for their part in plotting against Hitler; and his grandfather was the composer Ernst von Dohnányi, who knew Brahms and Bartók. The Brahms connection gives the focus for the celebrations: Paris gets the cycle of symphonies over two nights, while this concert – like Thursday's at the Festival Hall – paired the Third Symphony with the Second Piano Concerto.

In Von Dohnányi's conducting – never remotely showy – it is the clarity of his approach and his inclination to underline the natural democracy of Brahms's orchestral writing that is absorbing. A restrained but highly atmospheric Mendelssohn's Hebrides overture was a pointer to this concern for capturing the timbre and finesse of the early Romantic colour palette, even in mature Brahms. It made the major-minor ambiguity of the symphony all the more carefully poised. The heroism sometimes perceived in this score was clearly less important to Von Dohnányi than the integrity of the musical argument, right through to the warm conviction in the return of the opening theme in the final bars.

The Philharmonia was on glowing form, and the implicit understanding with their conductor was nowhere more apparent than in the collaboration with Yefim Bronfman in the concerto. Bronfman not only had the force to vie with the orchestra at full tilt, but also a crystalline delicacy and grace. Significantly, Von Dohnányi, for all his modest demeanour, knew exactly when to impose his authority on both soloist and orchestra alike, to powerful effect.

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