

Dohnanyi & Philharmonia: Simply Stunning

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The Philharmonia Orchestra's concert at the Kennedy Center late Saturday afternoon, under the direction of Christoph von Dohnanyi, was one of the great musical events of the season.

Dohnanyi, now 74 years old, is perhaps the only active conductor whose appearances inspire the passionate anticipation that used to greet the late performances of such long-ago maestros as Leonard Bernstein and Herbert von Karajan. During his extended tenure with the Cleveland Orchestra, Dohnanyi made music -- night in, night out -- that was all but unrivaled for passion, clarity, sinuous grace and technical precision. This was Washington's first opportunity to hear Dohnanyi with his "other" orchestra (he has been principal conductor of the London-based Philharmonia since 1997) and he did not disappoint.

Somehow, Dohnanyi inevitably manages to take a group of 100 players and turn them into the world's largest chamber music ensemble. I was stunned, again and again, by the richness of detail and sheer specificity of expression he summoned from the Philharmonia musicians. They were not generic cogs in a gigantic machine. Instead, the brass players, the winds, the solo strings all had *faces*. All seemed unique and vital characters in the magnificent, multiplicitous musical dramas Dohnanyi led with such Olympian command.

Berlioz's Overture to "Le Corsaire," which began the program, was an exuberant romp that never lost track of its roots in classical serenity. Lisa Batiashvili was the soloist in the Sibelius Violin Concerto. The opening movement was problematic: Both Batiashvili and the orchestra played soulfully, but they seemed to be participating in two separate performances that hadn't quite been coordinated, with only occasional agreement on such essential matters as tempo and general mien. And then, as fortune would have it, Batiashvili broke a string in the cadenza. She excused herself and, upon her return, soloist and orchestra found a unanimity that had hitherto eluded them -- a unanimity that now led directly to the heart of this bleak, brooding masterpiece.

Batiashvili would seem to be a major talent. She spun out Sibelian melody with cool intelligence, almost effortless virtuosity and a tone of dark silk. She is just as passionate as one could want but never effusive or sloppy about it. I was equally taken by the mysterious, simmering stew of sound Dohnanyi concocted to surround her, which called to mind some of the magic and otherworldly strangeness that envelops the children in the '50s movie thriller "The Night of the Hunter" during their nocturnal flight down the river.

The afternoon closed with the Symphony No. 1 in C Minor by Johannes Brahms -- a work so familiar to both musicians and listeners that it is now very difficult to pull off. Dohnanyi must have been conducting this music for more than half a century, yet his interpretation grabbed the attention from the start, with its soaring strings and "am I having a coronary?" timpani hammer. This was big Brahms, full and loud, in the grand romantic manner, yet there was never anything soggy about it. Even the finale, which can sound uncomfortably derivative from Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" ("Any ass can hear that!" Brahms is supposed to have snapped when this was brought to his attention), was exhilarating in its prayerful affirmation. Standing ovations are pretty much de rigueur in our generous city; Dohnanyi and the Philharmonia deserved theirs.

The program was presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society.

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