

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

Dohnanyi's NSO Debut Is One for the Ages

By Tim Page

Washington Post Staff Writer

Saturday, February 11, 2006; Page C03

During the 1980s and 1990s, there were listeners who thought the leading classical music ensembles in the United States could be divided into two categories -- the Cleveland Orchestra, under the direction of Christoph von Dohnanyi, and all the rest.

Dohnanyi's interpretations were formal, Apollonian and as deeply felt as they were unsentimental, and he drew a powerful yet marvelously transparent sound from his players. In his hands, the Cleveland Orchestra seemed nothing less than the world's largest chamber group.

And now, roughly half a century after his first performance in the United States, Dohnanyi finally has come to conduct the National Symphony Orchestra. The program, presented for the first time Thursday night at the Kennedy Center, was made up of Bartok's Divertimento for String Orchestra, Robert Schumann's Cello Concerto (with soloist Alban Gebhardt) and the Brahms Symphony No. 1.

The Bartok proved a fine showpiece for the NSO string section, always one of its most reliable. The quietude Dohnanyi summoned at the beginning of the second movement was extraordinary -- it was hard to tell exactly when silence gave way to sound. The piece concludes with a double concerto of sorts for violin and cello: Concertmaster Nurit Bar-Josef and first cellist David Hardy played with just the right mixture of energy and incision.

Schumann's Cello Concerto is not heard so often as it used to be, due in large part to the composer's monochromatic orchestration and somewhat meandering sense of form. That there is wonderful music throughout the score was triumphantly reaffirmed Thursday night by Dohnanyi, the NSO and soloist Gebhardt, who played with sumptuous tone and keen musicianship. Indeed, he is an artist after Dohnanyi's heart -- tapered and immaculate, yet always songful -- and the concerto rarely has sounded so unified.

The Brahms First is played so often that a conductor better have a good reason for bringing it to town. This Dohnanyi did: Indeed, he served to remind us why the symphony became so popular in the first place. From the beginning, it was a performance of majesty and sweep. Even the celebrated opening, for surging strings against a fervent timpani, didn't sound like the anxious hammering in the throat that other conductors make of it, but rather a dramatic but lyrical prelude.

The echoes of Beethoven throughout the symphony (which Brahms always acknowledged) sounded less derivative and more of an extension of their heritage. Some of the finest playing came in the soft passages just before the big tune in the finale -- so wonderfully rich and dark and loamy that they sounded like Sibelius.

Those who want to hear what the NSO is capable of should be there when the program is repeated Saturday night. These are the standards for which the orchestra should aim. It was a grand night to have been at the Kennedy Center.

Colbert Artists Management Inc.

111 West 57th Street, New York, New York 10019
(212)757-0782 - Fax (212)541-5179 - West Coast (858)794-0182
E-mail: NYColbert@ColbertArtists.com