

CHRISTOPH von DOHNÁNYI

CONDUCTOR

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Dohnanyi energizes CSO

Maestro had the orchestra playing with an elegance

By John von Rhein, Tribune music critic *Published May 13, 2006*

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's need to maintain strong ties to a tradition that reaches back to the earliest years of the institution has brought a number of Old World masters into the Symphony Center fold. None is more welcome than Bernard Haitink, whose highly anticipated tenure as principal conductor begins this fall.

But there's also Christoph von Dohnanyi. If not a peerless technician in the Haitink manner, the Berlin-born Dohnanyi, 76, is an honest, serious, thorough musician whose recent successes with the CSO earned him return invitations this year as well as in the following two seasons.

His concert Thursday night was one of those memorable occasions when players and podium inspire and energize each other so completely that a standard symphonic program suddenly becomes anything but standard.

Mozart's Symphony No. 25, the so-called "little" G Minor symphony, showed Dohnanyi's impeccable ear for balancing and clarifying the sound of a Classical orchestra. The restless syncopations of the opening movement had a darkly dramatic intensity that looked ahead to Beethoven. Mozart's unusual scoring includes four horns, and Dohnanyi put their saturated color to telling use.

Then it was on to "Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks." The Strauss tone poem has been one of our orchestra's signature showpieces practically since it gave the American premiere in 1895. Indeed, the CSO performs this demanding score with such practiced virtuosity that one forgets how easy it is for lesser orchestras to make a hash of it.

Dohnanyi had the CSO playing with an elegance, lucidity and proportion that brought out the music's humor and high spirits. He's too sober an artist to elbow the listener in the ribs, as have such heavy-handed interpreters as David Robertson and Daniel Barenboim. The Chicago woodwinds were a joy, light and full of character, while our lithe strings found the chamber music in the opulent orchestration. Not for ages have I heard a more refined or enjoyable "Till."

After intermission there followed another absorbing performance, that of Brahms' First Piano Concerto, with Emanuel Ax as soloist.

The massive scale of this masterpiece, with its thick scoring, makes it an unwieldy challenge for even the best pianists and conductors to bring off successfully. Ax recorded the Brahms Concerto No. 1 a couple of decades ago with James Levine and the CSO, but that performance is nowhere near as commanding as the Brahms he, Dohnanyi and the orchestra gave Orchestra Hall on Thursday night.

The qualities that make Ax a major Brahms interpreter were all there: the big and pliant sonority, stamina, intelligence, poetic feeling and deep musicality. Brahms requires a lot of heavy lifting from the soloist in the outer movements, yet Ax balanced his command of the big bravura passages with great sensitivity to the delicate inflections that shape the raptly beautiful Adagio.

Dohnanyi led an incisive and caring accompaniment, creating a spontaneous sense of dialogue in which the piano and orchestra spoke to each other as respected equals. The audience went wild.

The program will be repeated at 8 p.m. Saturday. Don't miss it.

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