

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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BSO Plays to Modernist Tastes

by [MARK DeVOTO](#)

Thanks to the inspired visiting conductor François-Xavier Roth, the BSO subscription concert on Thursday night encompassed a thrilling group of remarkable moderns, producing the kind of programming many of us want to hear more often.

Anton Webern's *Passacaglia*, op. 1, is nominally in the key of D minor — a favorite dramatic key of the great Viennese from Beethoven to Berg — but the tonality is wrought in extreme chromaticism, at the very edge of tonal perceptibility, like Schoenberg's *String Quartet* op. 5, also nominally in D minor. And like that quartet, this *Passacaglia* is dominated by complex counterpoint that is difficult to follow even after repeated hearings. The eight-measure ground bass in 2/4 meter that defines the *passacaglia* is clearly perceptible only at the very beginning and in a few of the variations that follow, but mostly it is submerged in the orchestral texture, and at a number of points it can't be discerned at all; perhaps it is motivationally transformed in ways that become apparent only upon close analysis; perhaps the thematic continuity is Webern's own private fancy. Thus the listener is likely at a loss in apprehending overall design in what is traditionally supposed to be a readily perceptible architecture; instead, one hears an ebb and flow of surging melody and complex texture, rapid contrasts of tempo and dynamics, from the softest to *fff*. There's a great deal of *fff* in this work, more than one would expect from the composer who has been called the "master of the *pianissimo espressivo*." Indeed, the Boston Symphony may have tried too hard for explosive loudness in this wonderfully interesting performance, wherein the *fff* of one instrumental group drowned the *fff* of another, but that was probably Webern's fault for using that marking too much (I counted it on 17 of the 50 pages of score).

Last night's was the first live performance I had ever heard of Bartók's *Piano Concerto* no. 1, which is less well known than the easygoing No. 3, a late work (1945). The First *Concerto* dates from 1926, which is more or less contemporary with the *Piano Sonata*, the suite *Out of Doors*, and the *Fourth String Quartet* — all works in which Bartók included semitone *acciaccaturas* and clusters in his harmonic vocabulary. (Some of this crunch technique might be fallout from Bartók's 1923 meeting in London with Henry Cowell, an odd but fruitful juxtaposition of musical personalities.) For all the acerbically dissonant chordal sound, the entire work radiates a strongly tonal and sometimes bitonal spirit, with diatonic scales counterbalancing the percussive harmony, and a melodic style resembling folksong. Much of the concerto is motoric in its energy, with steady beat accompaniment, regular meters with occasional bumps, and good support from solo timpani (Bartók liked this enough to use it emblematically in several later works). The driving pulse traces back much further, even to Bartók's *Allegro barbaro* of 1911, or further than that to the *friss* that penetrates so much of Hungarian dance music. One might contrast this style with Stravinsky's *Piano Concerto* of 1924, in many ways just as motoric but with much more irregular meters verging on jazz. Later examples by Bartók include the *Sonata* for two pianos and percussion (1937) and the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* (1936), in which C major reigns supreme, as B major often does in this concerto. The form seems to be more or less concerto-standard in three movements, the second leading directly into the third, with some apparent cyclic connections, and 2/4 meter in the first and third with 3/8 in the *Andante* in between, so there is a sense of three-part form overall.

The soloist, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, approached the toccata proportions of the concerto with complete confidence and even relaxation, notwithstanding the constant spirit of excitement that the piece promotes. He demonstrated with ease how this concerto is a real dialogue as well as a struggle for supremacy between piano and orchestra. One remembers that Bartók himself was an excellent pianist (better than Stravinsky) who made performance a major portion of his career, and that a bright, clear piano sound was foremost in his mind (as, for instance, it probably wasn't in Brahms's).

Last night's performance was no less brilliant than the most recent complete *Firebird* I can remember with the BSO and Esa-Pekka Salonen in 2012 [[HERE](#)], but different in character. François-Xavier Roth has made a commitment to recording performances of the early Stravinsky ballets with as much historical accuracy as possible with his own orchestra, *Les Siècles*; there was evidence of that same kind of commitment last night,



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with chimes and trumpets installed in the balconies at the rear of Symphony Hall, and I think the Wagner tubas were there as well. The orchestra obviously enjoyed the entire task at hand. There were a few problems of balance, which I ascribe to Roth's testing the acoustics of Symphony Hall; several times the strings played so softly that they could hardly be heard. The flute entrance six bars before no. 1 was lovely but too soft; the *ponticello* crescendo four bars after no. 2 was too loud; the exquisite horn solo at no. 197 was at an expressive *p* dynamic but the accompanying strings (Violins II, cello and bass harmonics) were way too soft. Most of these carps are such as could easily be adjusted with a few words before the next performance. It was refreshing to hear the 7/4 trumpet-trombone fanfare at no. 203 played briskly at the marked *Allegro non troppo*, 208 to the quarter, so that the *Maestoso* ten bars later comes in at the precise *Doppio valore* of 104.

Stravinsky in his later years tended to downrate *Firebird*, possibly because it tended to be overplayed, and he himself agreed that it had been a principal resource in his own conducting career: "My conducting debut occurred with it (the complete ballet) in 1915, at a Red Cross benefit in Paris, and since then I have performed it nearly a thousand times, though ten thousand would not erase the memory of the terror I suffered that first time." For all that *Firebird*



Francois-Xavier Roth and Pierre Laurent Aimard (Robert Tores photo)

remains Stravinsky's most performed and most popular composition (perhaps *The Rite of Spring* is more famous for its notoriety), today's audiences who know it so well may lose appreciation for how radically original it is in musical history. Ravel's *Ma Mère l'Oye* ballet and Debussy's *Jeux* are unthinkable as orchestral marvels without *Firebird* as their immediate forerunner and inspiration. And *Firebird*, along with its predecessor *Fireworks*, reveals Stravinsky as a proto-serial manipulator of melodic intervals that is only now beginning to be understood. Stravinsky said that at that stage of his development as a composer he owed the most to Debussy; he owed almost as much, maybe, to Scriabin (but wouldn't have admitted it because he disliked Scriabin personally), and not quite as much to Rimsky-Korsakov. But in *Firebird* his own originality transcends all these obvious influences, and *Firebird* still holds up solidly after 108 years.

François-Xavier Roth has now appeared several times with the Boston Symphony, and his program last night promised and delivered the highest interest. The seriousness of his approach was in evidence at every point. His technique does not involve the use of a stick, and only at one or two places did I feel that baton gestures would have been more readily understood — the "Supplications" section of *Firebird*, for instance, which is a slow, legato 9/8, and in which sometimes the ensemble was slightly off. Webern's *Passacaglia* sometimes seemed to get a more athletic style, especially when the dynamics were over the top but the tempi were also changing — it can be difficult for an orchestra to perceive a ready three-against-four. My concert companion, sitting next to me, is quite certain that she saw Roth's feet lift completely in the air at least twice during the evening. I was watching his arms and didn't see this levitation, though I did see him rise up on his toes several times. These easily understood gestures were the only choreographic excesses that I saw in what I consider a remarkably well-controlled conducting style which revealed a comprehensive musicianship. We will all look forward to more of his appearances and inspired programs.

Mark DeVoto, musicologist and composer, is an expert in Alban Berg, also Ravel and Debussy. A graduate of Harvard College (1961) and Princeton (PhD, 1967), he has published extensively on these composers and many music subjects, most notably, harmony.

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