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FRIDAY, MARCH 8, 2019

Roth Brings Impressive Brahms to SFS



François Xavier-Roth (photograph by Mark Allen, courtesy of the San Francisco Symphony)

Last night French conductor François-Xavier Roth made his San Francisco Symphony (SFS) debut on the podium at Davies Symphony Hall. His program followed the usual overture-concerto-symphony format with music by Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Johannes Brahms, respectively. However, it was not until the intermission was followed by Brahms' Opus 73 (second) symphony in D major that the attentive listener could appreciate Roth's work at its most compelling.

By way of a disclaimer, I should begin by confessing that Opus 73 has long been my favorite of the four Brahms symphonies. There are so many intricate details in the structure that every listening experience, particularly those in concert performances, tends to turn up more subtle details than one had previously imagined. As to expressiveness, it is the one symphony that restrains itself from overplaying its hand, making a deep impression without going over the top.

Roth's performance made it clear that his understanding of both structure and rhetoric was extensive. He is a conductor that seemed entirely comfortable with repeating the exposition in the first (Allegro no troppo) movement, thus leaving no structural stone unturned; but he was just as comfortable in finding just the right grade of ascent to endow the final (Allegro con spirito) movement with the sense of a joyous ending without allowing the brass to indulge in stentorian

STEPHEN SMOLIAR



The author's construction of his reality of self!

ABOUT ME

STEPHEN SMOLIAR

Still trying to "liberate the mind from fear, superstition and pettiness."

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excess. Indeed, as the performance progressed from movement to movement, it was easy to believe that Roth was consistently keeping the entirety in his head, defining every step of the journey in the context of what had ensued and what would follow.

From an audience point of view, his engagement with the orchestra seemed to be meticulous. He knew how to make every detail click right into place without ever putting any of those details under a microscope. In terms of my own listening experience, I would say that his knowledge of what makes this symphony tick was the most comprehensive I have encountered since I used to overdose on those late recordings made for EMI by Sergiu Celibidache with the Munich Philharmonic. Indeed, satisfaction with Roth's Brahms account was almost strong enough to obliterate memory of what had taken place prior to the intermission.

Sadly, both of the first-half selections tended to go for passion in excess, leaving structure to fend for itself. The overture was taken from Schumann's Opus 115, *Manfred: Dramatic Poem with Music in Three Parts*. This is a collection of incidental music composed for Lord Byron's closet drama *Manfred: A dramatic poem*, which may be the best example of Byron at his most Gothic. There was no shortage of Byronic agitation that permeated the score, but Roth's reading of that score with the SFS musicians came across as all agitation and little else. According to his Wikipedia page, Schumann himself called the overture "one of the sturdiest of [his] creations;" but, as far as this listener is concerned, there are any number of counterexamples to refute that assertion.

This was followed by Liszt's first piano concerto in E-flat major, an example of Liszt's ability to realize a four-movement structure through a single uninterrupted flow of thematic material. The soloist was French pianist Cédric Tiberghien, also making his SFS debut, although he is probably already familiar to many of those attending recitals presented by San Francisco Performances (SFP). I have previously suggested that this concerto may have inspired Brahms to coin the adjective "*Lisztich*" as a favorite synonym for bad taste; and the contrast between the Liszt concerto and the Brahms symphony was, indeed, a radical, if not disruptive, one.

Most likely, Liszt composed this concerto to show off the skills of his favorite pianist (who, of course, was himself). There is no end of flamboyance in the rhetoric, making it almost impossible to resist an attack of the giggles by the time the score has progressed to the scherzo (*Allegretto vivace*) portion. Unfortunately, there was little about last night's performance that would convince the attentive listener to do otherwise. Furthermore, Tiberghien himself was far from the top of his game, to the extent that his "game" could be defined by SFP recital offerings in which he was as comfortable with Wolfgang Amadeus

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Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven as he was with John Cage. Similarly there was a raggedness of execution on the orchestra side, a rough-hewn rhetoric that seemed to be a continuation of Roth’s approach to Schumann.

Fortunately, Tiberghien redeemed himself by playing a solo piano composition that Liszt wrote late in life, “Wiegenlied” (cradle song). This was one of the selections from Tiberghien’s recently-released solo album on Hyperion, consisting entirely of music completed during the final decade of Liszt’s life. (This album was discussed on this site a little less than a month ago.) The calm stillness of this “other Liszt’s” rhetoric was throughly captivating. Audience attentiveness to subtleties that endured for only about three and one-half minutes was so acute that you could hear a pin drop. That encore offering went a long way towards restoring my previous high opinion of this pianist.

POSTED BY STEPHEN SMOLIAR AT 8:13 AM 

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