

Translation

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The Dancing Conductor

Yannick Nézet-Séguin Presents a Work by Nico Muhly with His Philadelphia Orchestra

By Felix Stephan

One does not hear a great performance like this every evening: the Philadelphia Orchestra took up temporary quarters in Berlin's Konzerthaus at the Gendarmenmarkt. The American ensemble which, even today, still draws on its excellent reputation from the past. The orchestra that proudly recalls such legendary music directors as Leopold Stokowski, Eugene Ormandy, and Riccardo Muti. It gave the American premieres of many milestones of European music history, among them Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand," Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*, and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

Thus, it was no wonder that the hall was bristling with excitement and anticipation. But what was that? Nico Muhly, born in 1981 and heralded in the program as the "hottest composer on the planet," proved to be a skilled entertainer from the beginning. His recently composed *Mixed Messages* sounded like a familiar medley of film music consisting of ecstatic science fiction tones and whirling action thriller effects – including hefty brass crescendos à la *Matrix* and incessantly revolving string figures à la Philip Glass. Music director Yannick Nézet-Séguin self-confidently spurred his musicians on. He thrilled the audience with abrupt undulations of his body and muscular dance interludes.

The 40-year-old Canadian is also under consideration as a successor to Simon Rattle. Although he occasionally appears in Berlin, he may still be unfamiliar to the public. That will perhaps change when he conducts the Philharmonic's popular season finale at the Waldbühne in June 2016.

The conductor moved more smoothly and supply afterwards in Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1. Nézet-Séguin gave soloist Lisa Batiashvili all the latitude she needed, adapted to her, and allowed the orchestra to resonate naturally. The Georgian violinist exuded lyrical intensity in the nocturnal first movement, enveloping herself in exquisite sorrow and graceful beauty. The orchestra was moved and continued to provide warming consolation. The Scherzo which followed erupted more abruptly. Batiashvili hurled furious barbs at the musicians. By this time, her shoulder-length hair hung wildly in her face; at times she fiddled as though possessed. The orchestra followed her with some distance. It did not really want to compete with this highly virtuosic tightrope artist. That the violinist and conductor must be close musical friends was not only apparent in Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto. For the encore, Batiashvili and Nézet-Séguin conspiratorially withdrew to the left side of the stage, where a Steinway grand piano stood by for Tchaikovsky's elegiac A minor Romance, op. 73 no. 6. Those who did not know it before know it now – Nézet-Séguin is also as sensitive an accompanist on the piano as a soloist could wish for.

Press Service KD Schmid

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And Rachmaninoff's Third Symphony, op. 44, after the intermission? Could it fulfill the high expectations one had of the orchestra from Philadelphia that had given its premiere? Yes, it could, but less with virtuosic brilliance than orchestral force. Emphatic strings and unfashionably grounded woodwinds, austere brass and a conductor nearly bursting with energy. It was a Rachmaninoff between high-frequency drama and crisp directness.

Photo caption: A showman – the Canadian conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin at the Konzerthaus