



Jaap van Zweden conducts the NY Phil with soloist Cynthia Phelps (left)

better crafted than many recent Philharmonic commissions from senior composers with every imaginable pedigree and connection. The basic emotional movement is from darkness to light—from “drowning in uncertainty,” as Adolphe wrote in a program note, to “embracing ambiguity”. The entire piece is about shades of mystery and irresolution—anguished doubt in the first movement, unresolved competition between soloist and orchestra in the scherzo-like second, and gossamer mystery in the finale.

Soloist Cynthia Phelps, Principal Violist for the Philharmonic, scooped under, soared above, and blended uneasily with an orchestra that snarled and screamed in carefully calibrated climaxes, but mainly shimmered and searched for elusive cadences in Adolphe’s quasi-tonal harmonies. Phelps played with a dark, powerful sound that refused to be overwhelmed by the orchestra’s multi-layered strings and vibrant percussion.

Zweden maintained suspense and momentum in the concerto from start to finish. That’s apparently what he does, as was dramatically evident in the second half of the concert, where Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4 delivered an unexpected thrill. The woodwind solos by oboist Liang Wang, clarinetist Anthony McGill, and bassoonist Judith LeClair (all principals) were beautiful, as expected, but I was even more riveted by the tension in the pizzicato scherzo and by the crazy speed in the finale—the fastest I’ve ever heard, yet controlled, centered, and finely detailed. How the orchestra was able to play at this tempo and not sound frantic or chaotic was a bit of a wonder, but the Philharmonic players can do just

about anything if a conductor pushes them and they are willing to follow.

The performance I heard was the second of three. Afterward, I told several orchestra players that I was completely unprepared for the Tchaikovsky. “The first time, we weren’t prepared either,” violist Rebecca Young told me, “but we were today.” When I asked whether the orchestra is on board with their new conductor, who seems so radically different from the last four [Alan Gilbert, Lorin Maazel, Kurt Masur, and Zubin Mehta], she said, “Most of us are, which is the best you’re going to get with this orchestra.” This was Zweden’s first concert with the Philharmonic since his appointment was announced. Apparently we’re in for a wild ride.

JACK SULLIVAN

Salonen: Violin Concerto Cincinnati Symphony

If you want (or are commissioned) to write a violin concerto in this day and age, your range of approaches is limited. You can’t really just do a fast-slow-fast piece in classic concerto form. Nor can you use a typical concerto-accompanying orchestra, because a modern composer has to use every imaginable color to show how imaginative he is. So, for example, you need the usual huge percussion battery that living composers seem to pride themselves on writing for. Then you have the problem that the violin is a pretty soft instrument. The audience is going to feel sorry for the poor soloist, trying to stand up to a wall of drums and gongs. That, in turn, will force you to write very aggressive music for the violin.

All of this applies to such well-known works as *Scheherazade 2* by John Adams—and it applies to the Violin Concerto by Esa-Pekka Salonen that was played by the Cincinnati Symphony in November. It was written in 2009 for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Leila Josefowicz—who later gave first performances of the Adams, having proved her ability to stand up to a big, percussion-laden orchestra. The violinist in Cincinnati was Jennifer Koh, who has trained herself to do the same. The rear stage, from one side to the other and ten feet deep, was percussion. In the first movement (of four) we heard mainly the marimba-vibraphone instruments. In the last movement—the only real slow movement—the violin could also be more itself than in the two middle movements, where it seemed to be in a rage.

So if you had some old-fashioned, romantic notion of what a violin concerto should sound like, you were disappointed. If you wanted a thoroughly modern take on the genre, you had to expect the orchestra and soloist to do outrageous things because a composer these days feels he has to push the envelope. You had to be able to say to yourself, “What an original piece!” and “What an imaginative use of a rock (or jazz) drum set!” With a very open mind you can see the composer’s intelligence and daring.

But, you know, the romantic concerto was richly satisfying, and none of these new ones is—ingenious, yes; satisfying, no. You may find it “interesting”, but you are not likely to long to hear it again. Contemporary composers feel they have to be avant-garde, original, a little wild. They want to put the whole world (and orchestra) in every piece. They want to convey a huge emotional range along with a huge range of sounds, ingeniously deployed. And, in recent years, they want to do that without alienating an audience. Well, I think Mr Salonen has done that. The problem is that the music itself does not draw me in and draw me back. I am sure that intellectually I could listen to it again because there are hundreds of details (often

fascinating ones!) that I might have missed or only caught a glimpse of the first time. But I am not drawn emotionally to this music at all, and I think we have to be if the music is to live on.

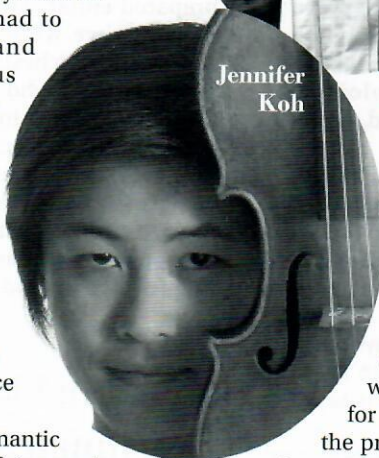
The conductor was Santtu-Matias Rouvali, who is Finnish and young and probably has a strong affinity for this composer’s music—as he does for Sibelius, whose Symphony No. 6 was on the program, too. It would be hard to imagine a better performance of the Sibelius. Every phrase had meaning and every movement had shape. It would be easy to just plow through it and treat it as nothing but atmosphere—especially after that violin concerto.

The Cincinnati Symphony is playing in the Taft Theatre downtown this season, while a new hall is being constructed in the shell of Music Hall. They already sound quite different. It’s a thicker sound and more immediate—at least in the balcony, where I sat. It is not muddy and not weak, but it is also less elegant than in Music Hall. It worked quite well for Sibelius and for Smetana’s *Moldau*, which opened the program. There is no first chair clarinet or trumpet at the moment, so that affects their sound, too. And attendance has not been good because people have to develop new habits in a new place (parking, for example). The whole set-up seems clearly temporary, and I think many symphony followers are simply sitting out the season or only going to concerts they can’t bear to miss. This was not such a concert for very many people, but they missed some excellent Sibelius.

DONALD VROON



Santtu Matias Rouvali



Jennifer Koh