



WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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On Conducting the New Year's Day Concert with the Vienna Philharmonic

Before conducting the New Year's Day concert in Vienna recently, I had often performed some of the works included on the program as encores while on tour with the Vienna Philharmonic, but I had never before conducted a whole program of waltzes and polkas. It occurred to me as I was learning the program how lucky I was to have played so many short pieces as a pianist, because a conductor's repertoire is generally limited to big symphonies with the occasional symphonic poem or overture. Having played Chopin Nocturnes and Waltzes, Schubert Impromptus, Schumann Novelettes, and Brahms Intermezzi, I felt I could draw from a whole world of music that condenses the wealth of musical creation into the form of a short piece. Playing these pieces as a pianist, you learn to adapt the musical line to a shorter form.

There are so many repeats in these Strauss pieces: whole sections and half sections, both in the polkas and the waltzes. This fascinates me, because I have always believed since my childhood that one of the greatest contributions music makes to human existence is precisely that it is unrepeatable. It was extremely interesting to me to think about and dwell on the different possibilities of giving each repeated section a slightly different character or angle by sometimes changing the balance in the orchestra and allowing subsidiary voices to acquire greater importance when a section was repeated for the second or third time. This especially applied to the polkas. It was also very important to find the connection between the different waltzes in each set with very slight, almost imperceptible changes of tempo between the waltzes, thus making a unity of similar elements rather than a monotony of independent, repeated sections.

Music like this is often frowned upon as being superficial, as if accessibility were equivalent to superficiality. On the contrary, there is plenty of music that is difficult to access and not very deep, and plenty of music that is immediately accessible yet musically rich. The music of the Strauss family has benefited over the years from its extraordinary degree of accessibility and the immediate acceptance of the works as they were written, but with time the pieces became victims of their very popularity. This music very often has a popular feeling but nevertheless always maintains a certain aristocratic quality which I find very appealing: it is popular but not proletarian, especially in the great waltzes. The slow polkas, on the other hand, like the Annen-Polka and the Alexandrinen-Polka have a tremendous amount of charm as only slow dances can have. The fast polkas, like Unter Donner und Blitz and the Zampa Galopp, have a quality of exhilaration and energy that are in great contrast to the slow polkas.

It is very difficult to make a program exclusively of this music. There are 19 pieces on the program, and it is very easy to let them just become a collection of encores. This is why the Vienna Philharmonic and I tried to develop an inner construction. Each half of the program began with an overture to an operetta: in the first half it was the overture to "Eine Nacht in Venedig," (A Night in Venice) and in the second half it was the overture to the "Zigeunerbaron" (the Gypsy Baron). There were two great waltzes in the first



WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

half, Märchen aus dem Orient (Tales from the Orient) and Rosen aus dem Süden (Roses From the South). They were interspersed by the Annen-Polka, one of the most perfect examples of the slow polka, in order to provide contrast between two great waltzes. After Rosen aus dem Süden, we played Freikugeln, a very fast polka, to end the first half.

In the second half we played what I would call a small symphony made up of three pieces from the Zigeunerbaron: the Overture, Einzugsmarsch (opening march), and Schatz-Waltzer. Then there was the Valse Espagnole of Hellmesberger, which was like the sorbet served in classical haute cuisine dinners in order to refresh the palate between courses, followed by one unit of three polkas with the slow one, the Alexandrinen-Polka, in the middle.

The second part of the concert was in itself conceived in two parts, and the first part ended with these three polkas. The second part of the second half began with what I believe is one of the most beautiful musical works ever written, Sphärenklänge, which opens with this wonderful, almost Wagnerian introduction. I fell in love with this piece the first time I heard Karajan conduct it on the New Year's Day concert in 1987, and it was partly for this reason that I asked to conduct this waltz this year. To contrast it, it was followed by yet another fast polka, Éljen a Magyar! The formal program then ended with Haydn's Farewell Symphony to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of his death. Because we "staged" the Farewell Symphony so that the musicians left the stage, leaving me unattended, the first encore was the polka: "So Ängstlich Sind Wir Nicht" (We are not Afraid). The second encore was the ubiquitous Blauer Donau (The Blue Danube), which as tradition dictates was interrupted by applause so that the conductor can wish the listeners in the Musikverein and the people watching the concert on television a Happy New Year. I took this opportunity to deliver a message of hope for peace 2009 and for human justice in the Middle East.

The Vienna Philharmonic owns this music, spiritually speaking, and not just for geographical reasons. In geographical terms, they own a very high percentage of the classical masterpieces: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Schönberg, and so on, but their relationship with the music of the Strauss family is closer than that of any other orchestra. This is due in part but not exclusively to the tradition of the New Year's Day concert, which is now in its 70th year. I have enjoyed a very long relationship with the orchestra for many years both as pianist and conductor, but to play this Strauss program with them was a very special occasion for me not only because millions of people watched it on television but because of the attitude of the musicians. One could have expected, and almost excused, an attitude of: "We know it all," but I was heartened and inspired by their curiosity and openness to rethink with me the different styles in this highly varied music. Questions of tempo, rubato, and dynamics were looked upon as if for the first time, and this coming from such a great orchestra. It was a perfectly balanced combination of attitude and aptitude.

It was wonderful to feel the orchestra refusing to let itself fall into the routine of what they already knew to be "successful." They had a freshness of discovery in their approach which is so important; after all, you cannot expect the listener to be surprised by a sudden modulation in the music unless the players are able to give the feeling of inventing it on the spur of the moment. A clear understanding of the form and structure of the music allows the players to create the impression that they are



WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

inventing it at that moment. Rehearsing intelligently sometimes means deciding what must not happen rather than what should. I think it is erroneous to claim that what I call strategic thinking in music (which one could term “telehearing” as opposed to television) is in contradiction with the freshness of spontaneity. The better the musical preparation is structured, the more the intuition can be given free reign. Before one plays the first note of a piece one must be able to imagine the sound of the last note of the piece, which implies an understanding of the structure. This is what I mean by “telehearing.” However, because music takes place in time, the structure in music is also flowing. It is not set in stone; rather, it flows like water. Even the structure of music has a fluidity which is one of the reasons why music can touch people so much. The fluidity of music reminds them of the fluidity of life, and this is as much in evidence in a small polka or set of waltzes as it is in a large-scale symphony.

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