

Prophets and Illuminations

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Andris Nelsons has been a regular guest conductor with the Berlin Philharmonic for the last several years and, if the evenings spent in his company have been unpredictable – veering between controlled madness and transcendent inspiration – they have never been boring; more often than not they err on the side of greatness. This was certainly the case with his most recent Berlin appearance which teamed him with pianist Emanuel Ax for performances of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 14* and Strauss' *Burleske*, followed by a sometimes disorienting, sometimes triumphant *Also sprach Zarathustra* that was all the more thrilling for its occasional flirtations with chaos.

But even the mighty *Zarathustra* had trouble competing with the programme's opening work, which was not only a highlight of the evening but also arguably the most infectiously delightful performance of any Mozart piano concerto in recent memory. Mr Nelsons, who had abandoned his baton by the time of the first piano entry, has a particularly expressive way of conducting Mozart with his fingers, as if the whole hand is somehow too blunt an instrument to deal with the intricacies of the score. On this evening he seemed inspired from the first bar, and his enthusiasm spread quickly to the audience.

This excitable demeanour, however, never came at the expense of the music. Mr. Nelsons remained focused on articulating the smallest details without overstating them, and never allowed the accumulation of brilliant moments obscure the larger argument of the piece. In this regard, he could not have hoped for a more sympathetic soloist than Emanuel Ax. Mr. Ax, whose love of the concerto was visible from beginning to end, played with economy and clarity, highlighting the many reasons that one should rank this concerto among Mozart's finest with a subtlety that never overwhelmed the natural flow.

Together, Mr Ax and Mr Nelsons – supported by peerless playing from the Berlin Philharmonic – offered a level of engagement with the piece that would be difficult to surpass. Although there were a few unexpectedly dramatic moments – the orchestral interjection just before the first movement cadenza came as a genuine surprise – the performance generated its own electricity by setting its adventurous streak on a foundation

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Philharmonie.
Mozart: Piano
Concerto No. 14
in E Flat, KV 449.

Strauss: *Burleske* in D minor for Piano and
Orchestra. Strauss: *Also sprach
Zarathustra*, op. 30. Emanuel Ax, piano.
Berlin Philharmonic. Andris Nelsons,
conductor



of complete refinement.

The second movement in particular was a triumph. Mr Nelsons coaxed a big, fully-balanced sound from the orchestra that was further illuminated by the lyrical, outgoing piano of Mr Ax. In the third movement, both soloist and orchestra managed the feat of playing with absolute seriousness while, through their unerring rhythmic drive, making the whole thing sound like a lot of fun. If one could easily imagine a more reverent performance of this concerto, it would certainly be difficult to find one more generously good natured.

Mr Ax, however, was not yet finished for the evening. When the applause for the concerto had died down, a few more members of the orchestra appeared and both soloist and conductor returned for a performance of Strauss' *Burleske* for piano and orchestra, a work that was no less enjoyable for being something of a curiosity. Despite its flashes of inspiration and orchestral brilliance, the piece – written when the composer was only twenty – was perhaps most notable for offering almost no hints of Strauss' mature style.

Even the choice of solo instrument was curious. Strauss would go on to write wonderful music for the violin and the soprano voice – as well as concertos for the horn and oboe – but the piano would play a relatively minor role in his subsequent works. Yet the technically demanding solo part of the *Burleske* – which Mr Ax handled with the same poise, assurance and good humour that he had brought to the Mozart – suggested a strong affinity with the showpiece concertos of the late nineteenth century. Perhaps even at the age of twenty, Strauss realised that there was only so much he would be able to do with the instrument.

If the piece was something of an oddity, it was nonetheless given a lively and committed performance both from Mr Ax and from the timpanist, whose part was central to the success of the work. Mr Nelsons and the orchestra generated the right amount of sparkle and frenzy, rising to a feverish climax and then, in one of the few moments that predicted the Strauss to come, receded to a quiet conclusion with just a single pizzicato note from the strings and a quiet tap of the timpani.

If the *Burleske* offered a glimpse of a young composer who had not yet found his personal style, *Also sprach Zarathustra* – composed only ten years later – reveals Strauss fully formed. All of his hallmarks – the sweeping strings and anarchic woodwinds, the overwrought dances and the masterly solo violin – are present, as are a few extras (the organ, the giant bell) that would vanish from his arsenal; and if the overexposure of the past century has inured us to the idiosyncrasies of *Zarathustra*, Mr Nelsons' impetuous, unsanitised reading came as a welcome reminder of just how strange this music must have sounded around the turn of the previous century.

Although *Zarathustra* has received no shortage of recordings, it is a piece that benefits immeasurably from the acoustic of a good concert hall: the low rumble of the introductory organ pedal and the furious tremolo of the basses have a visceral quality that the home hi-fi cannot replicate. On this evening, the introduction had a distinct wildness to it, as though *Zarathustra*, while greeting the sun, was in constant danger of being knocked from his

mountainside by the wind.

Things grew quiet again, if not exactly calm, as the ‘Hinterweltlern’ section began – the slow and searching pace was well suited to the lustrous first appearance of the full strings – but it was not long before the unease at the heart of the piece reappeared. Mr Nelsons’ vision was less measured and less polished than some; he made little attempt to smooth over Strauss’ wilfully strange orchestration and, in the ‘Grablied’ section especially, he sometimes gave the impression of being only barely in control of the vast orchestral forces before him.

But then the bass fugue of the ‘Wissenschaft’ section began, and spread slowly to the rest of the strings in such an organic fashion as to obscure the studied quality of the counterpoint. It was magnificent. The wildness reappeared not long after, as the orchestra began its unstoppable ascent to the climax midway through the ‘Genesende’ section; but when they returned after a pause of no more than a second, it was as though everything had changed. When the unhinged woodwinds (remarkable playing from the flutes and clarinets) finally gave way to the outsized caricature of a Viennese waltz, it was clear that Mr Nelsons had been in control all along.

In the ‘Tanzlied’ section – which featured some excellent solo violin from the Philharmonic’s newly appointed concertmaster Noah Bendix-Balgley – one could discern in Mr Nelsons’ direction some of the same manic inspiration that had made the earlier Mozart concerto so engaging; it was overwhelmingly gorgeous, even as flashbacks to earlier sections threatened to derail it. But even after the midnight chime brought the dance to its end, the quiet calm of the conclusion retained a compelling tension.

Zarathustra is the kind of piece where one need only play the notes in the right order to generate a certain level of excitement; it was thus a pleasure to hear the reading of a conductor willing to take some interpretive chances (especially when those chances so often paid off). However, on this evening, it was the unfussy brilliance of a piano, a small orchestra and a Mozart score that provided the greatest illumination.