

Musikfest 3: Feeling the Spirit

JESSE SIMON

This was, as they say, the real thing. Although Sir Antonio Pappano and the strings of Rome's Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia delivered a perfectly good performance of Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (in the revised version for string orchestra), it was the towering presence of Busoni's *Piano Concerto*, with Igor Levit as soloist, that transformed the evening from merely pleasant to wholly unforgettable.

Those unfamiliar with the work were probably converted, while those who worried that they might go their lives without ever hearing the concerto in a real concert hall must have been close to ecstatic: between Sir Antonio's vivid conducting and Mr Levit's herculean feats of pianistic brilliance it was the kind of once-in-a-lifetime performance that left no possibility of being unimpressed or unmoved.

It is a rare concert indeed in which *Verklärte Nacht* is so thoroughly overshadowed. While Sir Antonio is well known for his ability to bring out high drama and raw emotions in the late-nineteenth-century operatic repertoire, his reading of Schönberg's dramatic poem was surprisingly low on theatrical rhetoric; certainly there have been darker, moodier and more conspicuously opulent performances, ones that give greater prominence to the contrast between tragedy and transfiguration, and ones that polish the work's textures until they gleam. Sir Antonio's reading was satisfying in a far quieter way: he did not seem especially concerned with the work's capacity for melodrama, nor was he inclined to conjure showy effects from the strings; rather he approached the piece as a simple story of uncertainty and resolution, and the charm of his performance lay in the simplicity and honesty of its expression.

The Schönberg, however, offered little hint of what was to follow. Busoni's *Piano Concerto* may not be underrated – most people who know it are happy to point out its virtues – but it is certainly under-performed. The reasons for its relative scarcity in concert programmes are obvious: the piece is close to a concert programme unto itself, with five



Igor Levit © 2019 by Peter Wieler
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Philharmonie Berlin. Igor Levit, piano.
Orchestra and Choir of the Accademia
Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. Sir Antonio
Pappano, conductor. Arnold Schönberg:
Verklärte Nacht, op.4. Ferruccio Busoni:
Piano Concerto in C major, op. 39.
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wildly diverse movements – the last featuring a male chorus – spread out over more than an hour. More prohibitively, it requires a pianist of superhuman stamina, capable of sustaining hushed trills, manic arpeggios and lightning runs of chordal figures more-or-less non-stop for the duration of the piece. Even with a willing orchestra and conductor, pianists who can transform the endurance test of a solo part into a credibly musical performance are difficult to find.

Igor Levit has never been afraid of epic undertakings – he has, among other things, performed all of Shostakovich's *Preludes and Fugues* op. 87 in a single concert – nor is he a stranger to Busoni, whose compositions and arrangements featured prominently in a series of recitals in 2019. But if he was exactly the right pianist for the concerto it was due less to his technical prowess than his belief in the music: he seemed to view the piece not as an unwieldy curiosity from the fringes of the repertoire but a work that, with the right performance, could sit comfortably next to the *Emperor* of Beethoven or the D-minor of Brahms in the canon of great works for piano and orchestra. In Sir Antonio, Mr Levit appeared to have found a musical partner willing to help make the argument, and the two of them approached the work with a mixture of advocacy and affection that guided the evening towards greatness.

Mr Levit possessed an unerring sense of when the piano was the driving force of the music, and when it should be made subsidiary to the orchestra. The work may not be a piano concerto in the traditional nineteenth-century mould – and a pianist would be mad to treat it as such – but nor is it, as some have suggested, a disguised symphony with piano accompaniment. The piano plays two very different roles within the score, and throughout the evening Mr Levit slid effortlessly between them. He attacked the solo passages of the first movement with forthright conviction, and his lyricism acted as a counterbalance to the heroics of the orchestra in the *Pezzo giocoso*; however he was equally comfortable placing the piano in the service of the larger texture. In the intense 'Sommessamente' section of the *Pezzo serioso* – the keystone within the larger arch of the five movement structure – it was a simple, declamatory melody from the piano that set the music in motion, but as the section gathered in intensity Mr Levit pulled back, using the swirling piano lines to add breadth and excitement to the roiling swells of the full orchestra.

In addition, Mr Levit displayed an unusual knack for finding moments of arresting melodic simplicity hidden within Busoni's occasionally daunting volleys of notes; in the *Pezzo giocoso* and the first part of the *Pezzo serioso* especially he was able to extract elegant lines from the innumerable restless runs up and down the length of the keyboard. It should also be said that, despite the work's forbidding technical challenges, Mr Levit appeared to be having a tremendous amount of fun, and his ability to communicate that enthusiasm – or perhaps his inability to conceal the joyous rush of sharing the concerto with an audience – proved remarkably infectious.

Mr Levit may have been the evening's motivating force, but Sir Antonio's unreserved commitment to the score was equally essential to its success. If his *Verklärte Nacht* was played as an intimate chamber drama, he approached the concerto as a full-blown epic and spared nothing in his embrace of its diverse passions. The first movement was expansive, while the *Pezzo giocoso* struck an unapologetically heroic tone. There was perhaps no finer

moment in the evening than the central section of the *Pezzo serioso*, in which orchestra and pianist were locked in complete synergy; yet the exuberant *All'Italiana* – in which Sir Antonio notched up the levels of wild excitement with the control of a master – managed a decisive transition into high irreverence without abandoning the seriousness and sensuousness of the previous movement.

The orchestra seemed equally attuned to the sense of occasion. The strings in the opening movement sounded far more invigorated than they had during *Verklärte Nacht*, and in the third movement their playing encompassed a spectrum from reverent to euphoric; the percussionists propelled the *Pezzo giocoso* and *All'Italiana* to frenetic peaks, while the woodwinds and brass brought depth and distinction to the work's frequent moments of profundity. In the final movement, the male choir carried the piece to a triumphant close, starting as a hushed *chorus mysticus* but building to a full-bodied celebration of being near to the divine.

To put it simply, hearing this music performed with such verve, joy and generosity of spirit was a thrill of the highest order. It was a performance in which every bar made a convincing argument that we were in the presence of a masterpiece, and each moment reminded us that we were witnessing music-making of near-alchemical stature. One can only hope that Mr Levit and Sir Antonio will collaborate on a recording: without some tangible evidence, we may look back on this evening and not quite believe it was real.