

Musikfest 4: Landscape Studies

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The Bayerisches Staatsorchester may enjoy a reputation as one of Europe's great opera orchestras, but they maintain an equally active life in the concert hall, and they have appeared as guests at Berlin's Musikfest in previous years. Their appearance this year, however, came with an extra sense of occasion: it was part of a larger tour in celebration of their 500th anniversary; and with Vladimir Jurowski, their new music director, at the helm, they delivered a varied programme that highlighted the full spectrum of the orchestra's considerable strengths.

Although the concert featured two established twentieth-century classics – Berg's *Violin Concerto* and Strauss's *Alpensinfonie* – it opened with a twenty-first century work by Victoria Vita Plevá. Ms Plevá's *Third Symphony*, which bore the subtitle 'White Interment' started life as a chamber work for oboe and string orchestra, but was reworked into a full orchestral version in 2003. Yet despite its expanded sonic palette, the symphony maintained a unity of purpose and simplicity of expression that proved captivating. The opening section was both expansive and desolate, propelled slowly forward by the swelling and receding of the strings. From out of these swells there came a pastoral lament for solo oboe that, while never rising to a place of virtuoso dominance, remained a constant presence throughout the piece.

Although the work was listed in the programme as consisting of a single movement, there was a breath of a pause which signalled a distinct second part; if the presiding mood remained largely unchanged, there was increased agitation in the strings and a greater sense of distress in the carefully controlled orchestral surges that seemed to be urging the piece towards its conclusion. Eventually the orchestra gave way to a brief passage for solo oboe and two violins, which in turn led to a section in which deep strings and icy woodwinds conspired to evoke a frozen landscape of harrowing emptiness. The decisive thump of the timpani brought the work to a suitably funereal conclusion, but the gloom of the forlorn journey continued to haunt the mind long after the symphony had ended.

A similar mood of haunted reverence hovered over the evening's second piece, Berg's *Violin Concerto*, for which Mr Jurowski and the orchestra were joined by soloist Vilde Frang. The concerto, which would turn out to be the final piece Berg completed before his

Vladimir Jurowski
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Philharmonie

Berlin. Plevá: *Symphony No. 3*. Berg:
Violin Concerto. Strauss: *Eine
Alpensinfonie*. Vilde Frang, violin.
Bayerisches Staatsorchester. Vladimir
Jurowski, conductor. Musikfest 2023

death, is, like his two operas, a near-perfect synthesis of the theoretical and the theatrical, using advanced harmonic language as a means of exploring the subtle details in an ever evolving series of uncertain emotions. On this evening Ms Frang's reading was notable for its poise and assurance, but also for its restraint: her ability to play with beguiling softness was matched by a general aversion to emphatic anguish and overstated outbursts. If the resulting performance often seemed to have an inward focus, the refinement of the playing achieved its own distinct intensity.

The introductory Andante section of the first movement was a sustained exercise in mood building – albeit a mood of amorphous and elusive character – which showcased Ms Frang's ability to craft hushed phrases that hovered just above the orchestra; if the subsequent Allegretto introduced a greater sense of urgency, it did so without breaking the spell of the opening. Even in the Allegro of the second movement, in which the violin part offers greater scope for emotive playing, Ms Frang remained composed, making her way through the most technically demanding passages with ease while holding onto the haunted demeanour established in the earlier movement; the Adagio section, which admitted some hints of optimism around the edges, reached its conclusion on a sustained note of fragile beauty.

The evening's finest performance, however, came in the programme's second half. On the surface there was little about Mr Jurowski's reading of Strauss's *Alpensinfonie* that drew attention to itself: the tempi were neither forced nor ponderous, and there were few interpretive exaggerations to heighten the work's dramatic effects. While Strauss was an unquestionable master of orchestral illustration, the refinement and balance of the performance – and Mr Jurowski's ability to highlight the work's instrumental depictions without overstating them – allowed one to appreciate just how successfully Strauss had been able to integrate his pictorial evocations into a clear, cohesive structure. If the work can sometimes sound like a series of ingenious vignettes, in Mr Jurowski's hands it emerged as a true symphony.

Even more than the preceding works, the *Alpensinfonie* offered the most wide-ranging demonstration of the orchestra's many strengths. The strings were magnificent throughout: in the nocturnal opening they added subtle undercurrents of volatility to the apparent stillness, and they brought a glowing majesty to the early scenes in the forest; there were few more invigorating moments in the work's opening quarter than the exuberant entry of the basses and cellos at the beginning of the ascent, and few things more impressive than the ability of the first violins to switch between generous warmth and glassy beauty.

The other sections and soloists were no less notable. In the alpine meadows leading up to the summit there were beautifully phrased passages of solo horn and solo oboe, the view from the summit and the post-storm sunset were stunningly rendered by the brass, and the woodwinds announced the approach of the storm with quiet anticipation. If the percussionists were at their busiest during the thunderstorm itself, they remained an essential presence throughout the piece, adding clattering cowbell to the alpine meadow or accentuating the triumphant arrival at the summit. But while Mr Jurowski took an obvious delight in the work's wealth of textural details – his handling of the waterfall and apparition drew a direct line to the Färberin's fantastic visions in the first act of *Die Frau ohne*

Schatten – he never allowed programmatic episodes to obscure the work's structural flow.

As a parting gift for the evening, Mr Jurowski and the orchestra performed the prelude to the third act of *Meistersinger*, a work with which the orchestra has an especially long history. If it seemed an unusually solemn choice for an encore, it was given a radiant performance that gave the audience a final chance to savour the orchestra's luminous strings and glowing horns, as well as Mr Jurowski's patient unveiling of the prelude's inner drama.