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Seen and Heard International Concert Review

Philadelphia's Orchestral Season Begins: *by Bernard Jacobson*

Beethoven: Eroica Trio, Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, Ignat Solzhenitsyn; Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center, 25.09.2005

Lindberg, Dutilleux, and Beethoven: Philadelphia Orchestra, Christoph Eschenbach; Verizon Hall, Kimmel Center, 28.09.2005

Coincidentally, two conductors took the Fifth this week. Critics are supposed to be captious persons, so you might expect me to bitch about the fact that both the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia opened their subscription seasons with Beethoven's most perennially famous and popular symphony. But in the wake of what I heard I cannot bring myself to be other than grateful for two interpretations that could hardly have been more different, except insofar as both were impressively faithful to the spirit of the piece; interpretations, moreover, whose qualities were complementary in the most fascinating and enlightening way.

As program annotator for the Chamber Orchestra during the last four seasons, I have been hesitant to write more than the occasional brief word about the group's activities. Now, however, that I am leaving Philadelphia—my future dispatches will come to you from the Seattle area, to which my wife and I are moving at the end of October—I feel less constrained, and the opportunity, and indeed responsibility, presented by those two Fifts really ought not to be neglected.

The Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia (known until the last few years of its four-decade existence as the Concerto Soloists Chamber Orchestra) is, as its name suggests, a small ensemble by contemporary symphonic standards. For the Beethoven Fifth, 38 players were on the platform, which you might think a number inadequate for Beethoven's often stentorian sonic demands. Bear in mind, however, that the composer himself would not have regarded it so, and also that the orchestra plays in the smaller of the Kimmel Center's two main halls. The Perelman Theater seats 650, little more than a quarter of Verizon's 2,500-seat capacity, and in that environment the impact of the Chamber Orchestra strings' sound yielded nothing to that of the Philadelphia Orchestra much larger string body, while the woodwind and brass sections positively gained in immediacy.

Not surprisingly, then, it was sheer lucidity of texture that offered the most revelatory aspect of the Chamber Orchestra performance. This was especially so in the celebrated transition passage leading from the scherzo into the finale, where the violins' at first fragmentary and then cumulative phrases were to be heard far more clearly than usual. A revelation, certainly. Yet clarity is not everything. In the Philadelphia Orchestra's grander acoustical setting, the passage, without any damaging obfuscation, had all the mystery that is just as crucial an element in Beethoven's vision.

To compare the two orchestras' playing, and the interpretative contributions of their conductor, was just this kind of swings-and-roundabouts business throughout. Eschenbach was, perhaps, at his finest in the first movement, which was projected with remorseless directness. Mercifully free from the sentimental vulgarities imposed on this music by his immediate predecessor, Wolfgang Sawallisch, for whom each succeeding return of the iconic main motif served to provoke a yet more melodramatic application of the brakes, Eschenbach's reading triumphantly restored not only the thrilling dramatic force but also the stylistic discernment that Riccardo Muti brought to the work in the 1980s. And I do not think I have ever heard a performance that more faithfully rendered the difference in the length of the sustained

notes at the ends of the symphony's first two phrases. As highly regarded a maestro of the past as Bruno Walter can be heard, in a recorded rehearsal of the Fifth, telling his orchestra, "the second *fermata* exactly the same as the first" (which if you look at the score it clearly isn't, there being an extra bar in the second phrase every time the passage recurs)—and then, in the performance that follows, carelessly making the second pause sometimes the same, sometimes longer, and sometimes actually shorter. Eschenbach made no such mistake.

Solzhenitsyn too was conscientious in this regard, if less strikingly so, and his first movement was almost equally compelling. His rather faster pulse for the Andante also carried conviction. But it was in the tempo relation of his last two movements that Solzhenitsyn's performance was decidedly the more successful. Beethoven marked the scherzo to be played at 96 bars to the minute, and the half-notes of the finale to go at 84; and while the absolute values of such metronome markings are seriously open to question, their *relative* validity is clear. The finale must surely emerge from the transition somewhat in the manner of a great river opening out on the plains after its passage through a narrow opening in the hills above, and conversely the ghostly reprise of the scherzo at the end of the development section should burst forth at a correspondingly faster pace like the malevolent goblins E.M. Forster found in his account of the symphony in *Howard's End*. Here Solzhenitsyn was as sure in his mastery as Muti was before him, and Eschenbach missed a trick by taking the two movements at pretty well exactly the same tempo. And yet—swings and roundabouts again!—as fine a player as the Chamber Orchestra's principal oboist is, his solo in that last reprise of the scherzo was outshone by the heavenly purity of Richard Woodhams's intonation in the Philadelphia Orchestra performance.

No similar comparisons suggest themselves in regard to the rest of the two programs, because their repertoire was quite different. Solzhenitsyn began his all-Beethoven program with a dazzlingly exciting performance of a work too often rendered with academic dullness, the underrated *Consecration of the House* overture, and the solo parts in the even more frequently underrated Triple Concerto were done with stunning zest, gorgeous tone, and a

refreshing sense of sheer enjoyment by the Eroica Trio. Eschenbach, by contrast, offered a contemporary first half on the evening I attended. Magnus Lindberg's short Chorale was skillfully crafted, but it gave me less pleasure than Henri Dutilleux's 28-minute *The Shadows of Time*, a recent score whose freshness of inspiration and combined brilliance and rhythmic impulse belie the composer's 80 years at the time he was writing it in the late 1990s.

It was a pleasure to hear these two serious new pieces from Finland and France in the orchestra's first subscription week of the season. But I do not accept the often expressed view that frequent performance of the great classical works is a disservice to the public. It is precisely the capacity of such pieces as Beethoven's Fifth to yield up new perspectives and previously unsuspected facets in any worthy interpretation that makes them masterpieces in the first place. And Eschenbach and Solzhenitsyn both met the challenge to marvelous effect in their widely different ways.