

Gergiev, Kavakos and the Mariinsky Leave Superb Impression

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 **Switzerland Ammann, Shostakovich, Mussorgsky (Ravel):** Mariinsky Orchestra / Valery Gergiev (conductor), Leonidas Kavakos (violin) Tonhalle, Zurich 15.11.16. (JR)

Ammann – ‘Turn’

Shostakovich – Violin Concerto No.1

Mussorgsky (Ravel) – *Pictures at an Exhibition*

The Russians living in the Zurich area were out in force for this concert, part of the Mariinsky’s tour of Europe.

Gergiev has been at the helm of the Mariinsky for nearly 30 years and his grip is tight. Gergiev’s conducting style is not perhaps the most precise, but precision is not what he strives for (unlike Sir John Eliot Gardiner the evening before); the Mariinsky Orchestra knows however how to react to his quivering hands and baton-less gestures.

We started off with a work imposed on the orchestra by the Swiss sponsor, Migros (Kulturprozent-Classics), a part of a triptych composed by Swiss composer Dieter Ammann, who was in the audience. I have heard the other two parts of the triptych before and have to say they have not stayed in my memory. “Turn” was composed in 2010 and is supposed to be the link between the other two parts “Boost” and “Core” and a sort of slow movement. It may have been quite slow, but it was certainly not dull. Ammann’s work seems unstructured but it is full of a variety of interesting sounds – the conductor’s complex score was the largest I have ever seen. The orchestra was rehearsing the piece until very shortly before the concert commenced, so we had to wait a seeming eternity for Gergiev to appear after the orchestra had come out.

The sounds which Ammann had the orchestra make included trombone slides, wailing and shrieking violins, chirping sounds resembling insects and birds, and trombonists hitting their instruments. The piece received a somewhat muted response from the audience despite a transparent performance from Gergiev and his orchestra.

Leonidas Kavakos emerged in a blue tunic looking like a hermit from Mount Athos or a 1970s hippie. His long lank black hair obscures much of his face. He plays like a God from Mount Olympus. Never judge appearances (I am thinking of Nigel Kennedy as I write this). The Shostakovich violin concerto was written in the days of Stalin’s oppression and put away for seven years before it could be safely performed by David Oistrakh. The opening slow movement portrays wistful nostalgia and was utterly chilling in its effect. The *Scherzo* displays Shostakovich’s sardonic wit and continually reminds us of the D-S-C-H motif, evident also in his Tenth Symphony. Kavakos’ intonation was totally secure, right up to those very high harmonics on the E string, and expressiveness guaranteed. The audience was spellbound, even though the work is not always easy listening. The *Passacaglia* was achingly beautiful in Kavakos’ hands before topping the performance off with a fast and furious *Burlesque* and *Allegro con brio*. To calm our nerves, we were rewarded by way of encore with some restful Bach.

After the interval, we were served rather more standard Russian fare, *Pictures at an Exhibition*. One marvelled at the Russian sound, the blazing trumpets, the virtuosity of the saxophonist and bassoons. The orchestra has this music in its veins which did mean that when Gergiev took “The Old Castle” exceptionally slow, robbing it of all forward momentum, it nearly fell apart. I particularly liked the evocation of the gloomy catacombs and the expertly fluttering trumpet in “Goldenberg and Schmüyle”. “Baba Yaga” was suitably ferocious, the “Great Gate of Kiev” blew the cobwebs from the very corners of the hall. I noted that the Mariinsky had brought with them a golden bell the shape of a submarine to add to the volume at the end of the piece.

After lengthy applause, Gergiev surprised us with his choice of encore: Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*,

all shimmering beauty and tinkling chimes.

John Rhodes